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### Enoughness, accent and light communities

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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 139

### **Enoughness, accent and light communities: Essays on contemporary identities**

by

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## Preface

The five essays gathered in this collection were written between 2011 and 2014 and circulated until now only as individual working papers. A much abbreviated and altered blend of chapters 2 and 3 appeared as Blommaert & Varis (2015); chapter 5 will be published in 2015 as part of a special issue (edited by both authors) on “the importance of unimportant language” in *Multilingual Margins*.

The papers are presented here in chronological order and thus represent a joint quest for more accurate and realistic forms of analysis of what is commonly called identity – in turn something embedded in notions such as culture, group, community or society. This quest was prompted by frequent encounters in our research on online and offline aspects of superdiversity with forms of behavioral patterning suggesting a growing preference for “small” identities – identities grounded in patterned and carefully dosed details of behavior – and “light” groups – groups not tied together by the vast amount of backgrounds, shared space and cultural assumptions imagined since Durkheim as the real stuff of social life and structure. These encounters compelled us to devise a small descriptive vocabulary – “enoughness”, “microhegemonies”, (chapter 1), identities as “accent”, (chapter 2), “life projects” and “light communities” (chapter 4) – capable of capturing these phenomena and doing justice to their importance as identity processes worthy of independent examination, but seen as operating in conjunction with – as a set of layers on top of, so to speak – better known “big” identities.

The individual working papers drew the attention of several scholars, and part of the vocabulary we designed is currently circulating in new scholarly work – which is gratifying. By bringing the separate papers together, however, we hope to achieve slightly more, showing our readers the coherence and gradual construction of a theoretical and analytical approach capable of accurately identifying and examining contemporary forms of identity processes, their complexities and impact. Our ongoing research, we hope, will soon add substance and detail to some of the more speculative statements presented here.

Tilburg, June 2015

Jan Blommaert & Piia Varis

## Reference and acknowledgment

Blommaert, Jan & Piia Varis (2015) Culture as accent: The cultural logic of Hijabistas. *Semiotica* 203: 153-177

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## Chapter 1:

# Enough is enough: The heuristics of authenticity in superdiversity

## Introduction

This short paper intends to sketch an empirical theory of identity in a context of superdiversity.<sup>1</sup> It adds to the development of new approaches to language and semiotics in superdiverse environments (Blommaert & Rampton 2011), and intends to offer a realistic, yet generalizable, approach to inquiries into the complexities of contemporary identity practices. Such practices now evolve in real-life as well as in virtual contexts, and connections between both social universes are of major importance for our understanding of what superdiverse society is about.

These complexities are baffling, yet perhaps not entirely new; what is new is the awareness of such complexities among academic and lay observers. Late Modernity – the stage of Modernity in which the emergence of superdiversity is to be situated – has been described as an era of hybridized, fragmented and polymorph identities (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari 2001; Žižek 1994), often also subject to conscious practices of ‘styling’ (Rampton 1995; Bucholtz & Trechter 2001; Coupland 2007). Prima facie evidence appears to confirm this: people do orient towards entirely different logics in different segments of life – one’s political views may not entirely correspond to stances taken in domains such as consumption, education or property. So here is a first point to be made about contemporary identities: they are organized as a patchwork of different specific objects and directions of action.

## Micro-hegemonies

It is perfectly acceptable these days to, for instance, have strong and outspoken preferences for a Green party and participate actively in electoral campaigns underscoring the importance of environmental issues and the value of sociocultural diversity, while also driving a diesel car and sending one’s children to a school with low numbers of immigrant learners. The robust hegemonies that appeared to characterize Modernity have been traded for a blending within one individual life-project of several *micro-hegemonies* valid in specific segments of life and behavior, and providing the ‘most logical’ solution (or the ‘truth’) within these segments. Thus, our Green party supporter can ‘logically’ drive a diesel car when s/he has a job that involves frequent and long journeys by car, since diesel

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<sup>1</sup> This paper emerged in the context of the HERA project “Investigating discourses of inheritance and identity in four multilingual European settings”, and was first discussed during a meeting in Birmingham, May 2011. We are grateful to the participants of that meeting, and in particular to Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese, Jens-Normann Jörgensen, Marilyn Martin-Jones and Ben Rampton for stimulating reflections on that occasion.

fuel is cheaper than other fuel types, and diesel cars have a reputation for lasting longer and being more robust than others. Our Green party supporter, then, finds him-/herself in the company of an entirely different community when issues of mobility and car use emerge than when general environmental politics are on the agenda; yet in both instances a particular micro-hegemony has been followed. The same occurs in the case of education: our Green party supporter wants 'the best for his children', and since highly 'mixed' schools are reputed to produce low quality standards in educational outputs, our subject again follows the most logical path in that field. For each of these topics, our subject can shift 'footing', to use a Goffmanian term, and each time s/he will deploy an entirely different register, genre, viewpoint and speaking position (cf. Agha 2007).

An individual life-project so becomes a dynamic (i.e. perpetually adjustable) complex of micro-hegemonies within which subjects situate their practices and behavior. Such complexes – we can call them a 'repertoire' – are not chaotic, and people often are not at all 'confused' or 'ambivalent' about their choices, nor appear to be 'caught between' different cultures or 'contradict themselves' when speaking about different topics. The complex of micro-hegemonies just provides a different type of order, a complex order composed of different niches of ordered behavior and discourses about behavior.

The combination of such micro-hegemonized niches is ultimately what would make up 'the' identity of someone. But already it is clear that identity as a singular notion has outlasted its usefulness – people define their 'identity' (singular) in relation to a multitude of different niches – social 'spheres' in Bakhtin's famous terms – and this is a plural term. One can be perfectly oneself while articulating sharply different orientations in different domains of life or on different issues. A left-wing person can thus perfectly, and unproblematically, enjoy the beauty of the works of Céline and d'Annunzio, notoriously fascist authors, since the criteria for literary beauty need not be identical to those that apply to voting behavior.

### **Discursive orientations and the quest for authenticity**

The foregoing argument is surely unsurprising; it can be empirically corroborated in a wide variety of ways and it undoubtedly reflects the life experiences of many of us. But we need to go further. What follows is a schematic general framework for investigating the complex and dynamic identity processes we outlined above. We can identify four points in this framework.

- a. Identity discourses and practices can be described as discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen (or can be seen) as emblematic of particular identities. These features can be manifold and include artefacts, styles, forms of language, places, times, forms of art or aesthetics, ideas and so forth.
- b. To be more precise, we will invariably encounter specific arrangements or configurations of such potentially emblematic features. The features rarely occur as a random or flexible complex; when they appear they are

presented (and oriented towards) as 'essential' combinations of features that reflect, bestow and emphasize 'authenticity'.

c. We will inevitably encounter different degrees of fluency in enregistering these discursive orientations. Consequently, identity practices will very often include stratified distinctions between 'experts' and 'novices', 'teachers' and 'learners', and 'degrees' of authenticity. In this respect, we will see an implicit benchmark being applied: 'enoughness'. One has to 'have' enough of the emblematic features in order to be ratified as an authentic member of an identity category.

d. Obviously, these processes involve conflict and contestation, especially revolving around 'enoughness' (s/he is *not enough* of X; or *too much* of X) as well as about the particular configurations of emblematic features ('in order to be X, you need to have 1,2,3,4 and 5' versus 'you can't be X without having 6, 7, 8, 9'). And given this essentially contested character, these processes are highly dynamic: configurations of features and criteria of enoughness can be adjusted, reinvented, amended.

Let us clarify some of the points.

1. We speak of identity practices as discursive orientations towards sets of emblematic resources. The reason is that, empirically, when talking about identity or acting within an identity category, people 'point towards' a wide variety of objects that characterize their identities. Particular identities are clarified – i.e. offered for inspection to others – by referring to particular forms of music (e.g. classical music versus heavy metal), dress codes (the suit-and-necktie, Gothic style, dreadlocks, blingbling), food preferences or habits (e.g. vegetarians versus steak-eaters, oriental or Mediterranean cuisine, beer versus wine drinkers), forms of language (e.g. RP versus Estuarian British English; HipHop or Rasta jargon, specialized professional jargons, hobby jargons such as the discourse of wine experts, foreign accents etc.), art forms (e.g. Manga, contemporary or conceptual art; 'pulp' versus 'high' movies etc.), names (being able to name all the football players in a favorite team; being able to refer to Hegel, Marx, Tarkowski, Dylan Thomas, practices of 'name dropping') and so on. Discourses in which people identify themselves and others include a bewildering range of objects towards which such people express affinity, attachment, belonging; or rejection, disgust, disapproval. One can read Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) as an illustration of the range of features that can be invoked as emblematic of particular (class) identities.

2. These features, however, need to be taken seriously because they are never organized at random: they appear in specific arrangements and configurations. It is at this point and by means of such particular arrangements that one can, for instance, distinguish discourses of identity-as-heritage as discourses in which the particular configuration of features reflects and emanates images of unbroken, trans-generational transmission of 'traditions', of timeless essentials, of reproduction of that which is already there. Discourses of identity-as-creation would, contrarily, be organized around configurations that enable an imagery of innovation, discontinuity and deviation. Thus, it is clear that administrative criteria for, e.g., Britishness include very different configurations of discourses

on the same issue from a right-wing nationalist organization, a cultural heritage foundation or a radio DJ specializing in Reggae. 'Essential' Britishness will each time appear in an entirely different shape. One can already anticipate the many ways in which such differences can become fields of sharp conflict and contestation, and we will return to this below.

3. The different degrees of fluency in enregistering these discursive orientations are crucial as another field of contest and conflict. When criteria are being set (i.e. particular configurations of emblematic features are assembled), some people will inevitably have easier access to these features than others, and will consequently have less problems in discoursing about them (and 'in' them, by embodying them or by displaying them as part of their 'habitus'). We emphasize the processual and dynamic nature of this: we use 'enregistering' rather than 'register', because as we have seen, the specific configuration of features is always changeable and never stable, and people are confronted with the task of perpetual re-enregistering rather than just acquiring and learning, once and for all, *the* register. Competence (to use an old term) is competence in changing the parameters of identity categories, and in adjusting to such changes.

4. Conflict and contest are evident in such a shifting and dynamic process, where, furthermore, the stakes are sometimes quite high. Being qualified by others as a 'wannabe', a 'fake' or some other dismissive category is one of many people's greatest anxieties. For people charged with crimes, or asylum seekers hoping to acquire the refugee status, such categorizations can be a matter of life and death.

5. A special note about 'enoughness' is in order. The benchmark for being admitted into an identity category (as a 'real' or 'authentic' member) is 'having enough' of the features specified for them. This is slippery terrain, because 'enough' is manifestly a judgment, often a compromise, and rarely a black-and-white and well-defined set of criteria (this even counts for apparently clear and unambiguous administrative criteria, see Mehan 1996 for an excellent example of a 'learning disabled' child; Blommaert 2009 for a judgment call of sorts in asylum procedures). Competence, to return to what we said above, often revolves around the capacity to make adequate judgment calls on enoughness. Enoughness also explains some of the strange and apparently incoherent phenomena observed in contexts where authenticity is the core of the issue, as in minority cultural groups. We observe in such contexts that the use and display of 'homeopathic' doses of e.g. the heritage language can suffice as acts of authentic identity. Greetings and other concise communicative rituals, indigenous songs or dances can prevail over the absence of most of 'indigenous' culture as features that produce enough authenticity (e.g. Moore 2011 for an excellent example; also Silverstein 2006). In contexts of rapid sociocultural change (as e.g. in the case of migration) and the dispersal of contexts for identity work (as in the increased use of social media), we can expect enoughness to gain more and more importance as a critical tool for identity work. One needs to be 'enough' of a rapper, not 'too much'; the same goes for an art lover, an intellectual, a football fan, an online game player and so forth.



## Enoughness in action 1: The chav

The range of features that can be employed in identity work in order to produce authenticity can be wide and include a number of different, and sometimes very elaborate semiotic means. However, in actual practice the features that produce recognisable identities can be reduced to a very limited set, and here we encounter something that can be called ‘dosing’. That is, mobilising an authentic identity discourse about oneself can be a matter of attending to the most infinitesimally small details – sometimes even only observable to those ‘in the know’ – and a very small number of recognisable items, such as a piece of clothing.<sup>2</sup>

In enregistering such features, certain rules need to be observed for the process to be successful – to be recognised by others as what was intended. These are the rules that ‘newcomers’, ‘beginners’ and ‘wannabes’ need to observe and mobilise in their own identity work in order to ‘pass’ as authentic to someone (cf. e.g. Kennedy’s 2001 account on racial passing). This is where the Internet, for all the freedom and opportunity it is seen as offering for creative identity-play, appears not only as a useful instructional, normative source for the ‘wannabe’ but also as a space rife with regulatory discourses on ‘how to’ be or become someone. YouTube, for instance, features plenty of ‘how to’ videos – videos providing viewers with instructions on the minute details of how to be an ‘authentic’ gangsta or emo – that is, the features that should be employed for an authentic identity as a gangsta or an emo to be produced. The Internet now offers an infinite range of identity assembly kits and complements them with volumes of users’ guides. Such identities are not necessarily offered to *replace* others; they are offered as additional *niches*, and one can walk in and out of them ad lib. The users’ guides, therefore, are the micro-hegemonies we mentioned above.

The chav culture – a form of working-class British youth culture – is one example of a subculture very visible on the Internet. A search online for anything ‘chav’ provides plenty of material for someone wishing to ‘chavify’ oneself (although it should be perhaps pointed out that this is not amongst the most desired and aspired to identities to be displayed by young Brits) – from YouTube videos to images that put forward a ‘chav-semiotics’ where certain features are iconic of a chav identity.

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<sup>2</sup> We can see ‘dosing’ also in the many studies of ‘styling’ now available in the literature since Rampton’s (1995) pioneering work. Homeopathic doses of features – one sound sometimes, or one word – can be enough to redefine the speakers in an interaction as well as the whole situation itself.



Figure 1: The chav

Chav identity, as articulated for instance on YouTube, is flagged by means of features including obesity, smoking, street drinking, rowdiness, teenage pregnancy, unemployment and, surprisingly, one particular fashion feature. Soccer player Wayne Rooney would be the archetypical chav. In getting the right amount of recognisable 'chav', a very small semiotic dose is in fact enough for a certain identity discourse to be activated. Here the metaphor of medication is perhaps useful: just as the pain killer we take to get rid of a headache features one active substance in the dose that takes away the pain – while the rest of the content can in fact be totally irrelevant for achieving that aim – in producing an authentic identity all that is needed is one active substance in the dose.



Figure 2: Chav smiley

As we can see from Figures 1 and 2<sup>3</sup>, in the case of producing 'chav' this 'active substance' is the fashion feature we mentioned above: the British luxury brand Burberry, with its fingerprint tartan pattern. Burberry manufactures a wide range of products, such as clothing, shoes and accessories, and as a brand has become emblematic of the working-class chav culture. The fact that this often takes place in the form of *counterfeit* Burberry products is of no major importance as such: it may in fact be essential for the products themselves to be 'fake' in the production of an authentic 'chav'. Whether 'real' Burberry or not, the brand itself is indeed emblematic of 'chav' to the extent that the Burberry check

<sup>3</sup> All the images and web information appearing in this paper were retrieved on June 28, 2011.

is also enough in itself to turn other cultural products into 'chav' – as in the case of Chav Guevara (Figure 3.).



Figure 3: Chav Guevara

Turning Che Guevara into Chav Guevara by presenting him in the Burberry check pattern points to a significant, more general aspect in identity work.

Administering the right amount of specific semiotic features is at the core of authenticity: being an authentic someone requires orientations towards certain resources that index a particular desired identity, and, as with chav identity, the dose of resources can be minimal, almost homeopathic. The dose can be small, but the only thing that is required is that it is *enough* – enough to produce a recognisable identity as an authentic someone. And as the illustrations here make clear: this single emblematic feature can be applied in an almost infinite range of cases, redefining every object into a 'chav' object. On the Internet, we find underwear, cars and houses coated in the Burberry tartan, along with almost every imaginable cartoon figure and superhero. The 'active substance' of chavness can be blended with almost any other substance to produce the same 'real', 'true', 'authentic' and, above all, instantly recognizable image: the 'chav'.

### **Enoughness in action 2: Is this pub Irish enough?**

The second vignette illustrating the processes described in this paper engages with a globalized social and cultural icon, to be found at present in almost any large and middle-size city of the Western world and many parts of the non-western world as well. Wherever it occurs, the Irish pub is instantly recognizable. And as we have seen in the previous example, this recognizability is triggered by the use of a small set of 'active substances' that, when present in the right dose, lend a pub its instant identification as 'Irish'. The active substances are objects and artefacts people orient towards in an attempt to construct authenticity.

The Irish pub is undoubtedly an instance of the ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), something which has been developed quite recently as a particular iconic place breathing a kind of fundamental ‘Irishness’ inscribed in its layout, spatial organization, furniture and products on offer. As for the latter, there is little doubt that the Guinness beer brand has been instrumental in developing and promoting this worldwide ‘standard’, so to speak. The Irish pub is an artefact of globalized commodification.

As a globalized commodity, it has become extraordinarily successful. In Belgium alone, 86 ‘Irish pubs’ are listed on [www.cafe.be](http://www.cafe.be), the main website on cafés in Belgium. Most, if not all of them are of course run by Belgian publicans; customers would be served in the language of the place and some of the staff working in such pubs have never visited Ireland. Such Irish pubs do in fact present a blend of local and global features; the presence of the globalized features turns them into instantly recognizable Irish pubs; the local features ensure that the overwhelmingly local customers do not feel out of place in such pubs.

Let us now turn to the globalized features, the ‘active substances’ as we called them. Running through about one hundred Irish pub websites (and having visited a good number of such pubs ourselves), we see that a small handful of emblematic features appear in almost every case; we can list them. But before we do that, let us have a look at one illustration, in which we see several of the emblematic items. In Figure 4, we see a coaster from an Irish pub in the small Belgian town of Zottegem:



Figure 4: Paddy’s Pub, Zottegem. [www.irishpub.eu](http://www.irishpub.eu)

1. Pubs have a recognizable *Irish name*. This name can be a family name. From the list of Belgian Irish pubs, we note: Blarney, Conway, Fabian O’Farrell, Finnegan, Kate Whelan, Kelly, Kitty O’Shea, Mac Sweeney, Mac Murphy, Maguire, McCormack, Molly Malone, Murphy, O’Fianch, O’Malley, O’Reilly, O’Dwyer, Paddy, Patrick Foley, Scruffy O’Neill, Sean O’Casey. Apart from a name, an identifiably Irish word can be used, such as ‘An Sibhin’ or ‘The Ceilidh’. Alternatively, the pub’s name refers to Irish symbols such as the Shamrock, or to well-known

characters from Irish literature such as Molly Bloom. And words such as 'Irish' and 'Celtic' can also be used to flag the Irishness of the pub.

2. There would be a preference for a particular kind of *Celtic lettering* in shop signs and advertisement boards; this can be done 'completely' or by approximation. In Figure 4 we see a rather amateurish attempt in 'Zottegem', where especially the 'e', the 'g' and the 'm' have a Celtic twist.

3. Some stock symbols of Ireland would be present. The official website <http://www.of-ireland.info/symbol.html> lists the following canon of five 'symbols of Ireland': the flag, the shamrock, the harp, the Celtic cross and the ring of Claddagh. The three-leaf clover, *shamrock* would be present in almost every case – see Figure 4. The *Irish harp* would also be quite frequently used, certainly when Guinness beer is advertised; less used are the *Irish flag* and the *Celtic cross*. We have not found instances of the use of the ring of Claddagh. Also quite widespread as a symbol of elementary Irishness is the *color green* – see again Figure 4 above, where green dominates the coaster as well as the clothes of the figures depicted in it.

4. Irish pubs would almost always advertise *music* as part of their character and attractiveness. Evening shows with live bands, often performing folk music, are quite a widespread feature of Irish pubs, and one Belgian Irish pub is called after the legendary folk band 'The Dubliners'. Other Irish stars such as Van Morrison and U2 would be mentioned, and theme nights would be organized around their music.

5. Finally, some *products* are omnipresent. *Guinness beer* is undoubtedly the indispensable commodity on offer in any Irish pub. *Jameson whiskey* is another very frequent item on offer, and both would often be visibly advertised from the outside of the pub. Other 'typical' products would be Kilkenny's beer and Irish cider; when food is offered, Irish lamb stew and Irish steak would very often be found on the menu.

These five elements dominate the Irish pubs in Belgium; no doubt, they will be found elsewhere around the world as well.<sup>4</sup> They combine in a rustic, dark wood and brass interior to form a kind of cosiness welcomed by customers. The Zottegem Paddy's Pub summarizes its character as follows:

"The Paddy's pub is an Irish pub where everyone feels at home and makes oneself comfortable (sic). It's got everything you can find in an Irish pub, nice music, Irish whiskeys, Guinness, Kilkenny, Adam's Apple, Irish food combined with European dishes, in a word, a part of Ireland in Zottegem Belgium."

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<sup>4</sup> A possible sixth feature could be this. Almost all pubs would organize a *St Patrick's Day* event. Customers are requested to dress in green colors that day, and substantial drinking at discount prices would be the backbone of the event; live bands would perform as well.

Note the Belgian accent in Paddy's English, and observe the statement "Irish food combined with European dishes" – which summarizes what we intended to demonstrate. Irish pubs blend a small dose of emblematic globalized Irishness with a whole lot of local and other features. Guinness and cider are flanked by solidly Belgian beers such as Jupiler and Leffe on tap. So too with food: apart from the Irish lamb stew and the Irish Angus beef, Irish pubs in Belgium offer the same snacks and meals as those offered by non-Irish pubs in many places around the world. O'Reilly's in Brussels, for instance, offers some iconic Irish food along with buffalo wings, beef and veggie nachos, hamburgers (with Irish beef), as well as the very English fish and chips and Sunday roast (<http://oreillys.nl/brussels/menu/7-food-menu.html>). And in many pubs, a choice of Irish whiskies would be complemented by a rich variety of original Scotch malts. Irishness can be extended, as we can see, into a broader realm of Anglo-saxon-ness. Needless to say, nevertheless, that almost every Irish pub advertises itself as *authentically* Irish.

Is there a critical limit to the amount of emblematicity that a place ought to display in order to be a recognizably 'Irish' pub in Belgium? When is a pub 'Irish enough' to pass credibly as such? From our observations, we see that *at least some* of the features listed above are mandatory. One feature is not enough: a pub called 'Sean O'Reilly's' but not serving Guinness or other Irish products would not easily be recognized as 'Irish' ("what! You don't have Guinness?!"); in the opposite case, it is not enough to serve Guinness to qualify as an Irish pub. Irish pubs need to *look* and *feel* Irish, and they achieve that by means of a bundle of emblematic features: a name, a choice of products, displays of the shamrock or the harp, the color green, and so forth. The bundle, however, should not be *too big*. A pub which is so Irish that customers are required to speak English in order to get their orders passed, for instance, would not be too long in business in a town such as Zottegem. The same would apply to pubs that would only welcome Irish customers.<sup>5</sup> Irish pubs are globalized in a familiar way: a small but highly relevant bundle of globalized emblematic features is blended with a high dose of firmly local features. Customers can feel at home in Zottegem while they are, simultaneously, savoring an 'authentically Irish' pub ambiance. By entering an Irish pub, the local customers do not become Irish; nor would they have to, and that is the whole point: one merely enters a niche of Irishness.

### Enough is enough

In the two illustrations we gave, we have seen how authenticity is manufactured by blending a variety of features, some of which – the defining ones – are sufficient to produce the particular targeted authentic identity. In the case of the chav, one single feature was enough to define almost any other object as 'chav'; in the case of Irish pubs, the bundle was larger and more complex, but still essentially quite limited: a small dose of 'active substance' that turned pubs into Irish pubs in so many places in the world. In many ways, this process reminds us

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<sup>5</sup> A very small number of exceptions exist, mostly in larger cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, targeting English-speaking expatriates.



of what we know as ‘accent’: globalized identities are not absorbed *in toto*; they become an *accent*, a kind of inflection of other identities. This accented package – a-sufficiently-Irish-pub-in-Zottegem – is what we now understand as identity.

We can see the particular configurations of features mentioned above as the ‘micro-hegemonies’ mentioned earlier. In different niches of our social and cultural lives, we arrange features in such a way that they enable others to identify us as ‘authentic’, ‘real’ members of social groups, even if this authenticity comes with a lower rank as ‘apprentice’ within a particular field. We enter and leave these niches often in rapid sequence, changing footing and style each time and deploying the resources we have collected for performing each of these identities – our identity repertoire is the key to what we can be or can perform – in social life.

Enoughness judgments determine the ways in which one can rise from the apprentice rank to higher, more authoritative ranks – apprentices orient towards the ‘full’ authenticity while they start building their own restricted versions of it. Fans of Irish pubs, for instance, would begin to exhibit and develop their fanship by collecting ‘Irish’ objects: green top hats, shamrock coasters, Guinness beer glasses, Irish national team soccer jerseys and so on. They gather objects that culturally bespeak ‘Irishness’ – such Irishness that can align them with the object they orient towards, the Irish pub and beyond it, an imaginary essential Irishness. Throughout all of this we see that ‘culture’ appears as *that which provides (enough) meaning*, i.e. makes practices and statements sufficiently recognizable for others as productions of identities. And throughout all of this, we see such cultures as things that are perpetually subject to learning practices. One is never a ‘full’ member of any cultural system, because the configurations of features are perpetually changing, and one’s fluency of yesterday need not guarantee fluency tomorrow. In the same move, we of course see how such processes involve a core of perpetually shifting normativities (the things that enable recognizability and, thus, meaning), and because of that, power – power operating at a variety of scale levels in a polycentric sociocultural environment in which all of us, all the time, are required to satisfy the rules of recognizability.

All of this can be empirically investigated; it enables us to use an anti-essentialist framework that, however, does not lapse into a rhetoric of fragmentation and contradiction, but attempts to provide a realistic account of identity practices. Such practices, one will observe in a variety of domains, revolve around a complex and unpredictable notion of authenticity, which in turn rests on judgments of enoughness. The concise framework sketched here can serve as a heuristic for engaging with this enormous and rapidly changing domain of authenticity.

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## Chapter 2:

### Culture as accent

#### Introduction

Let us open with a mundane but telling example. Figure 1 shows an advertisement that was part of a campaign a couple of years ago. The well-known beer brand Carlsberg here advertises a new bottle.



Figure 1: probably the best bottle in the world

Isn't this interesting: a massive worldwide advertisement campaign is launched about the new shape of a beer bottle. The beer itself – what most people would perceive as the commodity to be purchased – remains unaltered; what changes is the packaging, the container in which the beer is sold. What is advertised and marketed here is a detail of the whole commodity, a non-essential aspect of it. Or is it?

We see in our present ways of life how often the things that are construed and presented as relevant or crucial are in actual fact details, hardly fundamental aspects of something bigger and more encompassing. Thus, this paper intends to draw attention to the very small proportion of cultural material that seems to matter in many aspects of everyday life: the fact that in a world which otherwise revolves around strong tendencies towards uniformity, small – very small – differences acquire the status of fundamental aspects of being. Identities and senses of 'being oneself' are based on and grounded in miniscule deviations from standard formats and scripts that organize most of what this 'being oneself' is actually about. This pattern, in which culture increasingly appears as an 'accent', an inflection of standard codes and norms, is part of consumer culture. In that sense, it is old – remember Marcuse's one-dimensional man (1964) and Bourdieu's remarkably stable class-structuring patterns of cultural distinction (1984). But the increased speed and intensity that characterizes the present economy of cultural forms and that finds its expressions in the widespread

intensive use of online social media makes these patterns more visible and less escapable as objects of reflection. It also turns our attention towards superdiversity as an area in which processes of cultural production and reproduction may acquire new – or at least visible – features, demanding new productive reflection and analysis (cf Blommaert & Rampton 2011).

This paper has limited ambitions. We intend to provide a rough outline of the two forces we observe and we see as defining this pattern of culture-as-accent: a strong tendency towards uniformity and homogeneity on the one hand, and the inflation of details as metonymic marks of the total person on the other. Both forces co-occur in a dialectic in which the very forces of homogenization are always ‘footnoted’, so to speak, by strong and outspoken tendencies towards inflating and overvaluing details. In fact, much of contemporary cultural life can perhaps best be described as ‘uniformity-with-a-minor-difference’, and consumer capitalism plays into both apparently contradictory forces. The clearest examples of these patterns can thus be found in advertisements, and most of the illustrations we shall use in this paper are taken from that domain.

### **The regimented society**

Our times are not different from most of Modernity – an era characterized by a tension between individualism and society, between an ideology of individual achievement and accomplishment, and the homogenizing pressures of an increasingly integrated society (see Fromm 1941 for an excellent discussion; also Entwistle 2000: 114-117, drawing on Simmel 1971). Consumer capitalism places itself right in the nexus of this tension, emphasizing individual choice while at the same time aiming at mass consumption of similar products. Remember that Marcuse saw this feature as defining consumer capitalism: the paradox that we seem to believe that we are all unique individuals when we all wear the same garments, eat the same food and listen to the same music. This exploitation of an ideological false consciousness was, for Marcuse, the reason to see consumer capitalism as a form of totalitarianism. It was also Marcuse who identified the behavioral and social outcome of this: the fact that people’s consumption practices become the key to their social life. It is on the basis of shared consumption – owning or admiring similar commodities – that people form social groups. Identities are shaped by consumer behavior, and Bourdieu’s *Distinction* provided powerful empirical arguments for this.

Marcuse’s thesis has been under fire for decades because of the totalizing and less than nuanced nature of his analysis (as well as, politically, the assumptions he used). Yet, the way our societies have of late developed may offer opportunities to return to the essence of the argument.

Marcuse identified as false consciousness the fact that people, in order to participate in the totalitarian consumption modes, offer themselves to exploitation. The money required to purchase cars, refrigerators and television sets was earned by working longer and harder – by enabling the very producers of consumer commodities, in other words, to maximize profits by maximizing workers’ exploitation. This opportunity for false consciousness (i.e. for the ‘ideological lie’ at the heart of the system) was predicated on a fully integrated society in which commodities circulated with speed and intensity, and in which

messages and images about such commodities – advertisement – appeared as the fuel driving this mode of intense circulation. People can only project particular ideas of identity onto, say, ownership of a BMW, when these ideas have been in circulation and have socially been enregistered, when they have become part of the common set of meaning-giving resources in a society. It is only, to adopt Bourdieu's terminology for a moment, when a field has been shaped that people can take positions in that field. Concretely: we can only see our purchase of a BMW as an act of identity when other people see it in similar terms. We can then convert the fundamentally unfree relationship that is at the core of this transaction (someone paying a determined amount of money as a prerequisite for acquiring a commodity, in this case a BMW car) into something else: 'choice', the practice of selecting from within a huge range of alternatives, by a free and unconstrained individual. Choice has become the concept that embodies the ideological lie identified by Marcuse. It is in the ideological construction of 'choice' that we convert an unfree structure of market transaction into a practice that is the pinnacle of freedom: buying something after a process of selection, in which we compare and assess immaterial features of the commodities on offer – their 'mythologies' in the sense of Roland Barthes (1957). It is in this process, too, that we convert consumption from a transaction between two parties into an act that bespeaks just the consumer's identity, into something that is about 'me' and 'who I am', not about the seller's bank account (cf. Cronin's [2000] 'compulsory individuality').

There is no doubt that our era differs from preceding ones in terms of the speed and intensity of the circulation of messages and images on almost any aspect of life, online as well as 'offline', effective as well as aspirational. The internet has become a vast forum for the marketing of commodities, culture and selves, one of the spaces where superdiversity appears most visibly and palpably. It has shaped (and this process is not finished) a degree of integration to our societies probably unparalleled in history, and this in the face of an ever-growing increase in complexity and diversity. And with this increasing integration comes a range of social and cultural phenomena perhaps not new in substance but surely in degree, scope and intensity. As to scope: many of these phenomena are now effectively global and have become part of the general sociocultural scripts of populations in almost every part of the world. There is no need at this point to elaborate; a booming literature is documenting this process (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Jenkins 2006; Varis & Wang 2011).

This increased integration shapes and reshapes a plethora of fields: any aspect of human life can now be organized into structured and ordered mini-systems, which we called elsewhere 'micro-hegemonies' (Blommaert & Varis 2011). That is, miniscule aspects of life can be shaped now as targets for ordering practices related to commodification, and all of these fields are now subject to 'how to' discourses, to forms of regimentation and submission to ideals, strategic objectives and targets, and to infinitely detailed patterns of 'management' (i.e. homogenizing discipline) and accounting practices. In that sense, what we currently witness on the internet is an infinitely fractal reproduction of the sociocultural domains sketched in Bourdieu's *Distinction*, a degree of elaboration and detail which is, in principle as well as in actual fact, infinite. The Foucaultian tension between 'normal' and 'abnormal', absorbed into elaborate practices of

'care of the self', is quite inescapable as a point of reference here (Foucault 1988, 2003).

These fields now cover every aspect of human life, and for every aspect we see the appearance of micro-hegemonic norms and standards: the body, food, art, work, mobility, dress, the mind, education, name it. Figure 2 provides a self-evident illustration of this: the way in which a female body is defined in terms of an ideal (or at least 'better') 'goal weight'. Figure 3 instantly connects this standard of a slim, fit and healthy female body to consumption – healthy food habits. In this illustration we see how aspects of human life – aspects which many people would understand as belonging to the private sphere – are intertwined with consumption behavior.

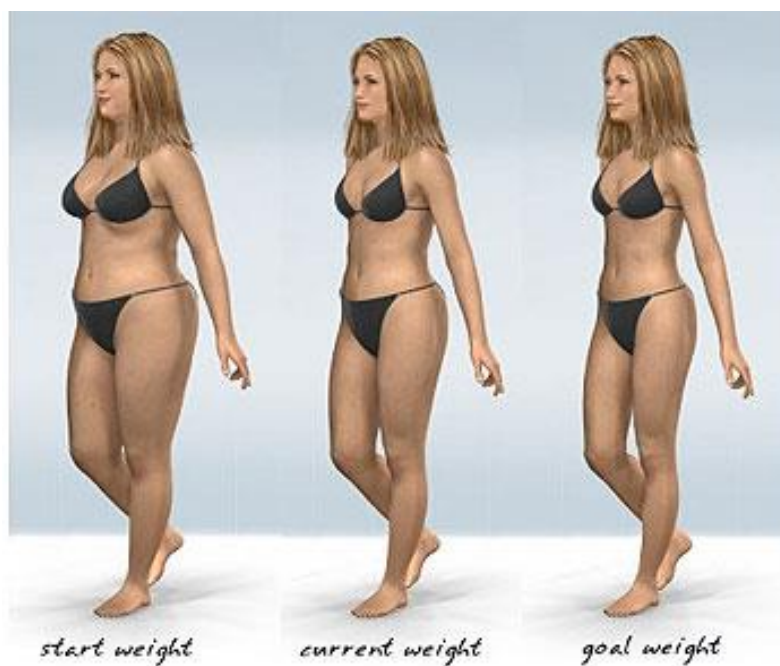


Figure 2: goal weight



Figure 3: healthy eating

Barthes, in another influential book, sketched the difference between ‘clothes’ and ‘fashion’ as grounded not in objective features of the objects themselves, but in their subjective ‘adjectives’, so to speak, in the mythological attributes that *particular* clothes acquired through elaborate discourses on quality, style and class distinction; such discourses were developed and circulated in the ‘fashion’ magazines, and they determined the commodity price of the garments (Barthes 1983). We now see that ‘fashion’, defined in those terms, has extended into an immense terrain of social and cultural life and that, in each of these now fashionable domains, we witness the emergence and consolidation of complexes of instruction and prescription, management and monitoring, identity effects – and all of this deeply interwoven with commodification. Healthy food can be purchased and demands investments in terms of ‘choice’; physical beauty and fitness can also be purchased, and while all of this used to be a rather ‘organic’ matter closely tied to one’s general lifestyle – fitness and physical prowess for instance being associated with hard physical labor, as in Zola’s *Bête Humaine* – all of these things have now become segmented and detached items subject to a normative regime and driven by consumption patterns. We have moved from one lifestyle to an infinite range of lifestyles, all of which are now objects of discursive and semiotic elaboration and all of which can now be seen as elementary aspects of the self.<sup>6</sup>

We thus witness an ordered and subjected self remarkably at odds with the ideologies of freedom that surround it, a self that needs to establish and maintain order over a distributed complex of micro-selves, each of which can define how others perceive, understand and evaluate us.<sup>7</sup> For each new segment of social and cultural life that becomes detached and organized as a space of discipline and order, becomes in the same move a space of social evaluation, something about which others can pass hard and uncompromising judgments. Such judgments are fundamentally rooted in recognizability: I recognize this or that aspect of behaviour as being indexical of, say, elegance, intelligence and sophistication, or of poor taste, weakness of character or judgment, boorishness or ‘wannabe’-ship. And I can recognize this because – pace Bourdieu – I share the codes and conventions of this field with others. In semiotic terms, I recognize things because of the relative degree of uniformity they display in relation to a particular (usually ideal, i.e. imagined) standard. Thus, recognizability is a key feature of how we organize the many aspects of social and cultural life; we will strive towards maximum recognizability in most of what we do and our worst

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<sup>6</sup> See Blommaert (2010: 47ff) for an illustration of ‘American accent’ being sold over the internet. It is an example of the infinite detailing of commodification we observe here.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, every technological innovation creates in essence a free and unscripted space, but becomes in practice a space filled in no time by prescriptions and norms. The social media are case in point. While they are ideologically often seen as a space for individual exploration and articulation, an avalanche of books on ‘how to be a star on Facebook’ have appeared, replete with detailed descriptions of how much to write, how often, and to whom. See e.g. Deckers & Lacy (2010) for an example of the micro-practices entailed in ‘self-branding’ online.

anxieties are often about not being recognized as that which we aspire to be. Recognizability also has to do with *degrees of doing*: in our endeavours to be someone or something, we can be judged as complete failures (e.g. as 'trashy' when trying to be 'classy') or failures to a degree (hence 'wannabes' – people who *almost* get the micro-management right, but not quite so) – also depending on the context of evaluation, and the evaluator.

Consider Figure 4, and observe especially the almost instant recognizability of the complex of semiotic features we can label – i.e. recognize – as 'business culture', 'managerial style', inscribed in dress, make-up, mood (smiling faces, i.e. optimism and congeniality), the organization of bodies in space, and the orientation towards objects such as laptops and documents.



Figure 4: Management team

Recognizability is about getting all the details right, about composing a jigsaw of features that are in line with the normative expectations that generate recognizability. Such arrangements are intricate and put pressure on the resources people have at their disposal; they are compelling, and not only in dominant sociocultural strata, as we can see from Figure 5: make-up guidelines for a Gothic woman. Here we can see how even 'deviant', i.e. subcultural identities operate on the basis of compelling guidelines and instructions. Subcultures are as normative as mainstream ones, and deviating from norms always amounts to trading one set of norms for another. Rejections of cultural scripts involve complex and demanding scripts themselves, often in response to the 'Why?' question that employing certain cultural scripts and consequently ignoring others elicit from our fellow human beings (hence, e.g. 'Why are you not on Facebook?'). And increasing social and cultural superdiversity provokes an



intensification of such questions, alongside an escalation of the 'how to' practices into new social and cultural fields (as e.g. wearing a Muslim headscarf or 'hijab'; see the next chapter).



Figure 5: Gothic make-up guidelines

As said, globalization has turned these patterns of recognizability – of semiotic homogeneity, in other words – into worldwide scripts for social and cultural life. Patterns of uniformity acquire recognizability across borders, driven as they are by a consumption capitalism that looks for market expansion for the same products. Conformity is a market ideal; it is also turning into a social and cultural ideal. The internet with its global reach and increasing availability strongly contributes to this, and we participate en masse on online platforms that are supposedly about self-actualization and the freedom to connect, yet run by companies that are making a lot of money out of our identity work. Thus, we have “standardized presences on sites like Facebook” (Lanier 2010: 16): sites that, while getting rich on advertising money, provide strict cultural scripts and templates for self-representation which can lead to, in efforts to conform, “self-policing to the point of trying to achieve a precorrected self” (Turkle 2011: 258).

All of this sounds perhaps as pessimistic as Marcuse’s old statements, and to some degree it is – as Appadurai (1996: 7) puts it, “where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency. Freedom, on the other hand, is a rather more elusive commodity.” But there is another side to the coin, and simplistic cultural defeatism is not a feasible approach.

## The inflation of details

While we see the tremendous pressures towards conformity as the key to many contemporary aspects of life, we also witness how these processes of homogenization inevitably contain a small space for 'uniqueness'. And this small space is a space of details – the space in which while most of our behaviour is fundamentally in line with the micro-hegemonies that regulate it. In this space we do place some accents, small deviations we call characteristics of our own uniqueness. These deviations can be, and usually are, extremely small – they can even be invisible to most people; see the small tattoo on the woman's body in Figure 6. The tattoo would be visible only when the body is uncovered – its default invisibility here is the whole point.

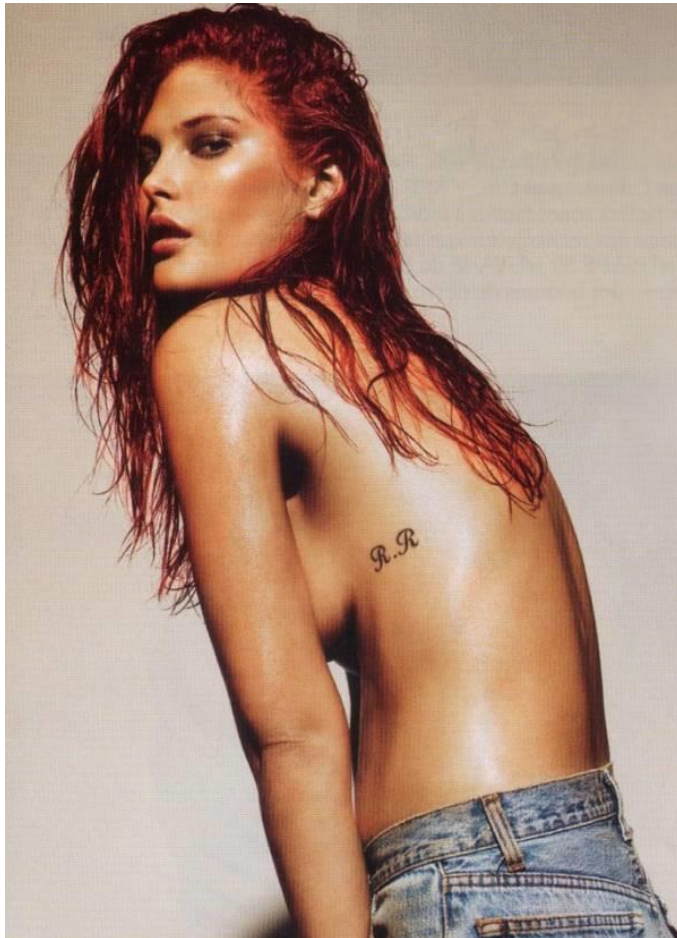


Figure 6: an invisible tattoo

Note also, in Figure 7, how extremely small differences appear to invoke a broad and deep complex of differences in 'style' and thence, in 'personality'. The three suits worn here are fundamentally overwhelmingly similar. Differences in color, cut, and attributes (e.g. the watch chain) determine the ways in which we project larger complexes of distinction onto the small differences. We are witnessing here the fundamental semiotic mechanism at work: details are metonymically inflated so as to stand for something far bigger and more profound, a difference in 'personality', i.e. in the script I offer to others as the way in which they should read and recognize me.





Figure 7: three different suits

‘Choice’, now, is located in the nano-politics of these details. As said, the system of consumer capitalism drifts strongly towards conformity. Goods can only yield maximum profits when they can be standardized and sold to huge numbers of customers. So what we see is that our actual range of ‘choice’ is severely restricted: we can choose between small differences, we move within a narrow bandwidth of choice. All cars are in essence very similar, and their key features and characteristics are entirely predictable. Within this overwhelming similarity of objects, we distinguish between brands, models, colors, options and gadgets and believe such choices are fundamental. We believe they reflect our most essential personality features, we believe that others will also recognize us in those terms, and we know that such choices will have effects on the price of the commodity we purchase. In actual fact, whenever we make such intricate choices, we make them within a very narrow range of differences, none of which are in themselves fundamental, but all of which have been made to be seen as fundamental by means of the mythologization described by Barthes discussing the ‘new Citroën’.

Producers play into this pattern, by continuously suggesting and emphasizing that the choice for a particular detail over others both reflects who you are and creates you in that way. Your ‘accent’, so to speak, thereby becomes the totality of your personality, and every possible choice you make in consumption is likely to trigger these metonymic associative attributions. Figures 8 and 9 provide illustrations for this.

In Figure 8 we see the actor John Travolta in an advertisement by the luxury watch brand Breitling. The message in the advertisement is that, while Travolta is universally known as an actor, this is just his ‘career’; in actual fact, he is a

pilot, and this more adventurous (and again, invisible) identity of his is projected onto the Breitling watch. Breitling indexes who Travolta *really* is.

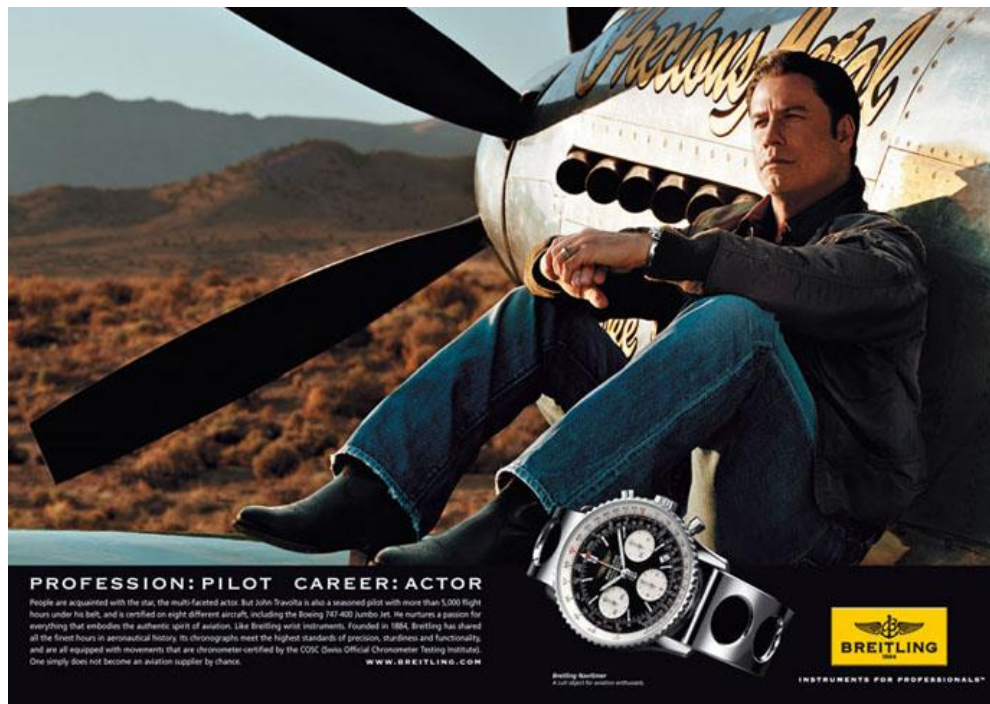


Figure 8: the real John Travolta

And Figure 9 shows us ‘the Bentley man’: an older and manifestly affluent man – tailored suit, classic haircut, and the Chesterfield sofa – who tells the rest of the world to sod off – the middle finger. The Bentley, that’s *me*, is the message. Again, this is not a ‘me’ people would often see (since I’m a distinguished gentleman I probably don’t show my middle finger as a routine), but that is the point: this is my *true self*, the self most people don’t usually see. In a classic metaphor, the true self is hidden, invisible and only perceivable to some – and on the basis of details that should be read in a particular way. The hidden tattoo reflects the true personality of the woman in Figure 6, the chain watch that of a person who wears that particular suit; the Breitling watch is the index towards Travolta’s true personality, and the Bentley car reveals that the man behind the wheel is someone who does what he likes and does not care about what others think of him.

All of those small signals need to be read as indicative of the whole personality. Anyone who observes advertisements every once in a while will not fail to pick this up. While every commodity is in itself mundane and trivial, advertisements produce the ‘adjectives’ that make some objects stand out and become ‘distinguished’ and distinguishing for those who purchase them. In a world of conformity, even such details – the stuff that makes us unique, that creates our ‘accent’ – are offered along lines of conformity and submission.

At the same time, however, we do see agency here. The consumer is not just someone who consumes – passively absorbs and unintentionally reproduces the commodity’s indexicals – but someone who *produces* a specific and ordered self through these acts of reproduction. At this point, we have to leave the imagery of

the 'cultural junkie' so often present in culture critique, of masses put to sleep by silly television programs and consumer habits. Someone who wears a Nike T-shirt, with the brand visible to all, not just submits to the order imposed by Nike, the producer. S/he also consciously produces him/herself in a particular identity format. Of late this dialectic understanding of such processes have been captured under the neologism 'prosumer' – a consumer who at the same time produces something (say, a YouTube film or a Facebook entry; see Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012). The 'prosumer' may be present across the whole spectre of consumer society, in fact drive that whole system by its dialectic of consuming and producing; and the more compelling the rules of consumer culture become, the more we will see the productive side of this oppression – it will, each time, create someone in a particular format of recognizability. There is, thus creativity in this process as we actively 'work on our accents'. The creativity is seriously constrained, but it is there nevertheless (cf Blommaert 2005, chapter 5).

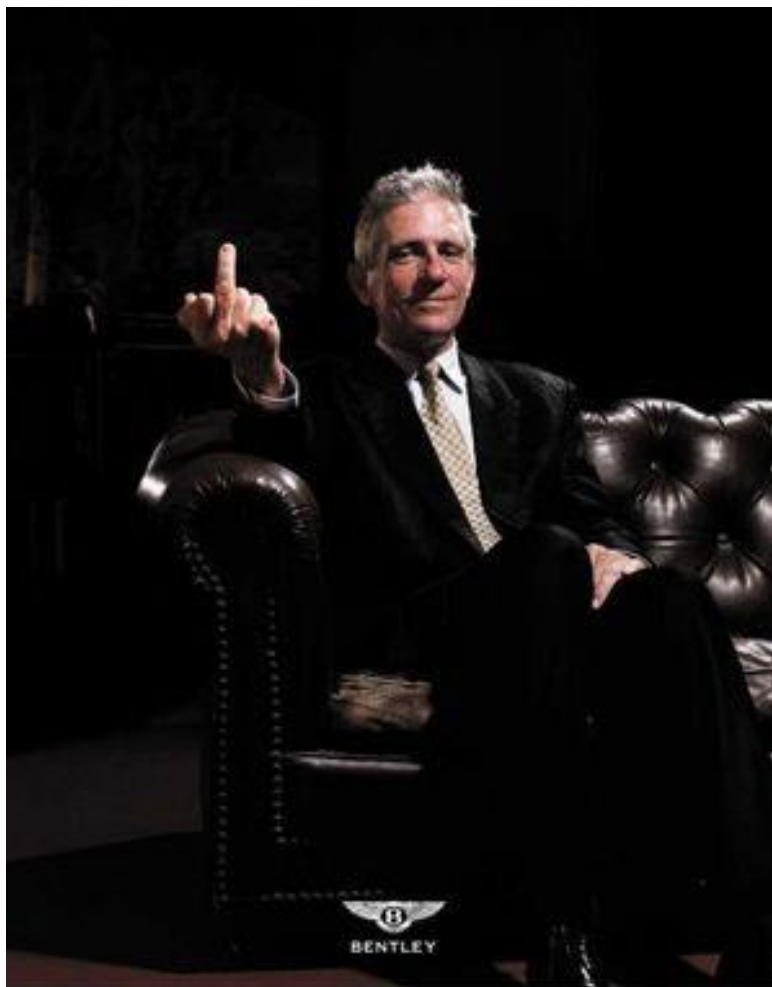


Figure 9: the Bentley man.

## Conclusions

There are numerous stories about the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, especially about the astonishment and inarticulateness of East-German citizens when they entered West-German supermarkets for the first time. When confronted with shelves containing dozens of brands of shampoo, they just did not know what to choose and asked more familiar customers what the differences in price between shampoo A and shampoo B reflected. Was shampoo B better? Did the bottle of B contain more shampoo than that of A? Were the cheaper ones harmful? And why were larger bottles sometimes cheaper than smaller ones? It took West-Germans a lot of thinking before they could answer such – altogether rather obvious – questions.

The East-Germans showed us something quite important: that in consumer culture, details are the true objects of marketing. It is the suggestion that products do not differ superficially, but that these superficial differences are in fact fundamental ones – so fundamental that a choice for or against them would reveal our true selves, both to ourselves and to others. Consequently, we surround ourselves with elaborate discourses on the importance of details, and have now turned our whole life into a rhetorical complex in which we rationalize our choices and preferences for particular details. We are now held accountable for every choice we make in life, and the worst possible answer when someone asks why we have chosen this commodity over another is 'I don't know'. Since every choice is seen as possibly defining our true selves because it always can be seen as derived from what we are 'deep down, we need to explain and rationalize all of our choices. Social media become a landscape full of accounting practices, in which we construct elaborate and infinitely detailed life-projects, dispersed over a myriad of aspects of behavior and life. Each of these aspects, we have seen, is subject to standards, to normative expectations. Yet, we continue to see them as fundamental of our total being, as reflective of our true, unique selves, of our authenticity. Authenticity, in turn, emerges as the battleground for cultural practices in superdiversity, with an expansion and intensification of the fields and objects around which authenticity can be articulated and contested (cf Blommaert & Varis 2011).

The overall picture we get from this is that of culture as an accent. Most of what we do in organizing our lives is oriented towards conformity to others. This is a compelling thing, because we need this level of conformity in order to be recognizable by others, in order to make sense to them. Culture, after all, is that which provides meaning in human societies. But at the same time, we continuously create 'accents' in relation to the standards we have to submit to: we construct very small spaces of uniqueness, of things that we believe we do not share with others. I also wear a suit but with a different necktie; and I wear a Breitling watch which, to some, will tell that I'm in fact and deep down a non-suit person, someone who loves the outdoor, a rugged man of action. Armed with these paraphernalia, we enter the daily social arena in search of recognition, both as someone who fits a broad category, and as someone who deviates from it. It is because of these deviations that others will perhaps find me more interesting than most, a more layered and mysterious character, someone creative and inventive – so creative and inventive that I create 'my own style' by

means of a unique combination of features, all of which can be read metonymically in relation to social categories, and all of which will provoke judgments by others.

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## Chapter 3:

# How to 'how to'? The prescriptive micropolitics of Hijabista

## Introduction

Identities have always been subject to prescriptive 'how to' discourses; there is or has been no lack of guides and instructors for identities.<sup>8</sup> The expansion of identity repertoires that we currently witness in the context of superdiversity naturally comes with an expansion of 'how to' literature, and the Internet is the prime vehicle for this. We see a mushrooming of self-help and 'how to' websites, films and social media groups, all targeting specific modes of behavior and thus aimed at producing people recognizable as X or Y. From 'how to be a Goth' to 'how to become a Facebook star', over 'How to trick people into thinking you're good looking' and 'How to know if you're a metrosexual': the list of potential targets for prescriptive discourse and illustration is endless and appears to respond to an increasing demand. YouTube, for instance, abounds with such material – how to dress like a skateboarder; how to be a good husband; how to be more feminine, etc.; 'Howto and Style' is also, together with for instance 'Music', 'Education', 'Sports' and 'Pets and animals', one on the list of 17 main categories for browsing videos on <http://www.youtube.com/>.

These prescriptive 'how to' discourses have a clear scope and they operate on a series of assumptions that, recapitulating arguments developed elsewhere, we can sketch as follows. Acquiring and assembling identities are matters of perfection and exact precision; when appropriately practiced, they achieve recognizability for you as someone or a certain kind of person. In fact, identity work boils down to collecting and arranging a bundle of small details measured as to their appropriateness and 'enoughness', the ordered display of which generates recognizability as X or Y. Hence, say, dressing *almost* like a skateboarder is not quite good enough, as combining skater wear with, for instance, cowboy boots (at first sight a harmless detail) will ultimately lead to a failed projection of 'skateboarder' identity. One is 'not enough' of a skater and 'too much' of something else. Perfection and precision, thus, require sustained and disciplined focus on the detailed micro-practices of 'getting it right'. These micro-practices, we argued earlier, are governed by 'micro-hegemonies': specific sets of norms that dictate the place of certain details in the ordered bundles that produce identities. Consequently, small changes in style – changing one detail sometimes – provoke big changes in identities, because such small changes rearrange and reorder the whole bundle. Every detail, thus, can be seen as in need of organization and ordering, and can so become an object of 'how to' discourse (Blommaert & Varis 2011, 2012).

In this chapter, we focus on a phenomenon called the Hijabista, and the online 'how to' literature that attempts to regulate this phenomenon. *Hijab* refers to the

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<sup>8</sup> A profoundly revised version of this paper, incorporating also a strongly revised and abbreviated version of chapter 2, appeared in *Semiotica* (2014).

sartorial norms, including the head cover, observed by Muslim women, and to the 'modest' style of Muslim women in general. *Hijabistas*, then, are Muslim women who dress 'fashionably' and/or design fashionable clothes, while orienting towards what is being prescribed by their religion in terms of dress<sup>9</sup>. Being a hijabista can be seen as a sartorial technology of the self (Foucault 1988; see also Fadil 2011 for a discussion on not-veiling as an aesthetic of the self) that finds its expression in a complex of micro-practices revolving around recognizable emblematic values of fabrics, cuts, accessories and styles. This phenomenon is not exclusively visible on the internet, but still very prominent in different online environments: one can find blogs (e.g. <http://www.hijabstyle.co.uk/>), shop in online stores (e.g. <http://www.hijab-ista.com/>), watch YouTube videos (more on this below), 'like' Facebook pages (e.g. <http://www.facebook.com/Hijabista>), and engage in discussion with others on these and other sites.

'Hijabista' as a word has its roots in the older 'fashionista', which refers to a keen follower of fashion and/or someone who dresses up fashionably. 'Hijab' is not the only word that has been used to form such a 'fashion portmanteau' word – another example of this would be 'fatshionista' (see e.g. *Diary of a Fatshionista*<sup>10</sup>). As the name suggests, fatshionistas are people who go against the received idea that fashion is only for the 'skinny', and both hijabistas and fatshionistas can in fact be seen as transgressive modes of fashionista, as neither Muslim nor overweight women are seen as the ideal targets of the prescriptive discourse on acceptable Western female bodies regulating their desired shape and the ways in which they should be (un)covered.

The relationship between Islam, female fashion and individuality has in fact been fraught with conflicts. In 1994 an international row broke out when Chanel designer Karl Lagerfeld showed a dress on which verses from the Qur'an were printed. Globalized fashion, so it seemed, should not in any way be confused with the Muslim faith. Conversely, wearing the hijab has in Western societies quite consistently been branded as a kind of uniformization of female Muslims, and so associated to the denial of individual liberties, the absence of freedom to articulate female identities, and the oppression of Muslim women in general. It is seen as a remnant of pre-Modernity and pre-Enlightenment, which is why Atatürk banned the hijab from his modernized Turkish state and Shah Reza Pahlavi banned it from his equally modernized Iran. The same arguments motivated a hotly contested debate in France in the 1990s and in several other European countries since then, leading to the call by Mr Wilders in The

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that, perhaps in contrast to what is generally believed, the issue of head cover and what (not) to wear is by no means a simple 'Muslim' thing – just one example of these complexities is Brenner's (1996) discussion of Indonesia, pointing to the fact that there, wearing the veil has not necessarily been seen as an 'Islamic', but as an 'Arab' practice. This is a further indexical layer in a broader discussion that is unfortunately largely beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> <http://diaryofafatshionista.com/>



Netherlands to introduce a special tax for women who insist on wearing the hijab. A large and growing popular and media literature documents such conflicting interpretations. Hijabistas, thus, assume a place in an area of controversy and conflict. Their sartorial practices need to balance between different worlds of interpretation, none of them socioculturally and politically innocent.

'Western' fashion is designed to cover specific kinds of bodies, and to a large extent cover them only minimally – hence the exclusion of bodies that are seen as non-fitting due to their 'wrong' shape, as well as the 'awkward' mix with bodies that are not available for the generous display of bare skin or are not by default aiming at attracting (often erotically interpreted) attention to themselves. Thus the emergence of niche fashionistas such as fatshionistas and hijabistas, with specific micro-hegemonies entailing specific micropractices of self-fashioning and self-consciousness.

These specific micro-practices play into the creation of what we have elsewhere (Blommaert & Varis 2012; chapter 2 above) called 'culture as accent' – a space for uniqueness and individuality within overwhelming pressures towards conformity. One's accent – the details that contribute to the making of one's unique identity – are often the result of very complex articulations where even seemingly contradictory identity discourses are brought together for the production of the totality that is 'my (unique) accent'. Articulation, in the words of Stuart Hall (1986: 53, emphasis original), is

(...) the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'. The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.

Our accents are the result of specific articulations, and all of this is tied into consumer culture and the consumption and display of certain consumer commodities. As Entwistle (2000: 124) puts it, in the "production of the 'body beautiful'", "the modern 'care of the self' has become one of the defining features of consumer culture. Rather than imposed on us, these practices call us to be self-conscious and self-disciplining." The preoccupation with the micro-practices of self-in-consumerism is very prominently manifest in e.g. the change of style according to occasion, year and season (hence, for instance, the fear of being a target of the damning 'that is *so* last season' remark for anyone who wishes to be stylish). As for the case of hijabistas, Jones (2007: 211) in her discussion on Islamic fashion in Indonesia points to these consumerist articulations as "an index of two apparently contradictory or mutually exclusive phenomena, a rise in Islamic piety and a rise in consumerism." However, here we should be wary of constructing any essentialist fundamental break between 'Western' fashion and

'Muslim' clothing and of implying the impossibility of combining these two. Just because the mix is not *necessary* does not mean that it is impossible, and, as we shall see below in more detail, our late modern consumer culture indeed enables and encourages the articulation of a whole range of identities, each with their own defining accent.

The product of engaging in specific practices of articulation is a tailored self – in the case of different fashionistas very literally so. This means striking a balance between 'standing out' and 'fitting in': "We can use dress to articulate our sense of 'uniqueness' to express our difference from others, although as members of particular classes and cultures, we are equally likely to find styles of dress that connect us to others as well" (Entwistle 2000: 138, 139). It is, as said above, a trade-off between conformity and uniqueness. Striking this balance is always easy, for one may – either accidentally or on purpose – produce too strong an accent that will be the target of criticism, ridicule etc. We will start by looking at corrective 'how to' discourses on unacceptable accents.

### **How (not) to be hijab**

The wish to be recognizable as someone and as a certain kind of person is part of the articulation of one's accent, as the failure to be recognizable as X may lead not only into non-recognition, but to the wholesale rejection or disqualification of one's identity ('misrecognition', in Bourdieu's sense). The first step in most of the how-to literature is therefore that of *demarcation*: defining what is in and what is out, what is authentic and what is fake, what is enough in the way of accent and what is not.

This is the case also with hijabistas. The three images below, found on different online forums, give a taste of the kinds of ongoing battles over acceptable accents and their articulations.



**No offense to anyone ,but this is not Hijab**

Image 1. <http://islamfashionandidentity.blogspot.com/2010/02/does-hijab-has-to-be-black-is-it-must.html>

When a Muslimah's convictions in Allah are strong, she willingly adopts the manner and dress code as described in the Quran. Below is a hijab campaign illustrating the correct use of a headscarf and outer garment. Truthfully, not every Muslim woman dresses exactly like this but Islam's flexibility in cultural dress allows us to alter this style to a degree.



Image 2. <http://www.muslimness.com/2009/11/whats-your-hijab.html>

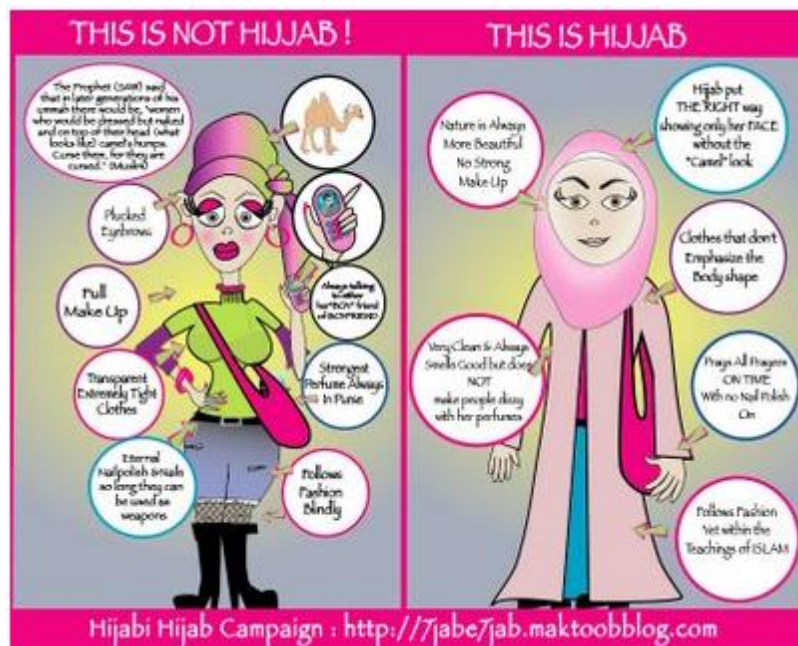


Image 3. <http://www.turntoislam.com/forum/showthread.php?t=47697>

When it comes to 'how to' discourses on identities, these discourses are always accompanied by a 'how *not* to' component explicitly or implicitly embedded in the 'how to'. The prescriptive images presented above are all very explicit, and clearly the objection here is to the stereotypically 'Western' fashion element: these images unequivocally reject the 'Western' ideal of female bodies (wear make-up, show your figure and preferably some skin, follow fashion trends, etc.), and they guide the viewer in 'how to do it instead to get it right'. Revealingly, the text accompanying Image 2 refers to the modification of the template for the prescribed style 'to a degree' – pointing directly to the 'unique' recognizability that should be part of one's self-articulation, while not being overwhelmed by too strong an accent.

Here we also see how the notion of authenticity is relevant in understanding accents: indeed, Entwistle (2000: 121) points to a whole 'moral universe' in which "dress and appearance are thought to reveal one's 'true' identity". Here, that 'true' identity would be that of a religious, modest self projected onto a fully 'veiled' body. However, evoking different centers of recognition – always a potential 'risk' in articulating one's accent – becomes a problem here, as too strong a fashion-conscious ('Western'?) accent potentially overrides the 'true' self that is supposed to be visible in the articulation of one's identity. Crossing the boundaries of expected authenticity is possible and tolerated, but the limits of that are strictly policed.

As we shall see next, details are indeed of essence in the successful articulations of (hijabista) identities

### **The pink marshmallow look, the hipster hijab and other accents**

In today's global supermarket of identities, the internet is full of instructions on how to attain certain accents, and the fracturing of identities is visible in the immense range of items and commodities that are made to seem important in one's articulation. As noted earlier, constructing oneself revolves around arranging an ordered cluster of details; permutations of such clusters enable a virtually endless range of 'small' identities to be produced.

We can view the 'how to' discourse, here in the case of the hijabista, as a continuum, where at one end of 'how to' hijab, we find basic, generic instructions. Hijabista videos on YouTube feature this whole range. For instance the video "How to wear hijab"<sup>11</sup> gives a detailed description on how to wear the headscarf, specifying four different types of instruction: how to wear a square hijab, an oblong Shayla, a one-piece Shayla, and a Al-Amira hijab. This is quite general, as we find out when we start examining the ways in which the hijabista can be accessorised to achieve certain stylised identities. Getting more specific, we find, for instance, the following: 'Criss Cross hijab style/tutorial'<sup>12</sup>; 'Hijab Tutorial Style for Work/High School/College – A Requested Look'<sup>13</sup>; 'Hijab Style

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1tYfBNfqgU>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Knb6tJ3N9-s>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEwP4h6gxn8>

Tutorial Using Lace Headband and a Butterfly Brooch'<sup>14</sup> (with the caption pointing out that 'The lace headbands and butterfly brooch are all from H&M'); 'Hijab style/tutorial – The Pink Marshmallow Look'<sup>15</sup>; 'Hijab/Hijaab Tutorial Style-Two Arabian Princess Looks'<sup>16</sup>; 'Hijab tutorial: how to wear a headscarf/hijab modern style with a flower.wmv'<sup>17</sup>; 'Hijab tutorial for glasses/sunglasses'<sup>18</sup>; 'StyleCovered- hijab tutorial pashmina with accessories'<sup>19</sup>; 'Pleated caterpillar style Hijab Tutorial By Ruby Ahmed'<sup>20</sup>; 'The Roley Poley Style Hijab Tutorial'<sup>21</sup>; 'Hijab Tutorial: Funky Layered Look (Requested)'<sup>22</sup>; 'Everyday Hijab Style/Hoodie Hijab Tutorial'<sup>23</sup> – and so on, and so on, ad infinitum.

Being a hijabista is thus by no means a single, uniform thing, and the 'how to' discourse illustrates the infinite possibilities provided by stylisation through the consumption and display of different commodities to suit certain occasions ('everyday'; 'work/high school/college') and to produce certain accents ('Arabian Princess'; 'The Pink Marshmallow'). The details and artefacts used give one one's accent, and open up whole universes of meaning, pointing to certain identities and lifestyles. Hence also – given that keeping up with fashion trends requires the spending of sometimes great amounts of money – we now see that the phenomenon of 'frugal fashionistas' has appeared (e.g. 'The Frugal Fatshionista'<sup>24</sup>). As described in the Hijab Savvy blog, "I'm really excited to be sharing this new series with all of you! The Frugal Hijabista is for the woman who enjoys – yes I said *actually enjoys* saving money and finding a bargain."<sup>25</sup>. Being frugal is, in fact, about *enjoying* being frugal, i.e. not something dictated by economic necessity, but a *lifestyle* actively chosen. Another such example is the

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kyEYcyMTwA>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9et52qHKVTY>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipgjgKGUqEQ>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwRu5ljtD-E&feature=fvst>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZfNqhZEC6s>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRpzZhxbm0U>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSq9Rqls7pE>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs9sTBANRgs>; "Well it's the turban style of wearing the hijab but more bulky and more loose. Works well with the crinkly type rectangular scarves. Inspired by the african dead dresses".

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2u\\_iXRG9KY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2u_iXRG9KY)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCeZriQma8I>

<sup>24</sup> <http://rhapsodani.com/thefrugalfatshionista>

<sup>25</sup> <http://hijabsavvy.com/category/frugal-hijabista/>, *emphasis original*



eco-hijab style which “fuses Muslims’ ‘green’ values with with [sic] their visual identity of modest clothing, for example organic hijabs made from bamboo.”<sup>26</sup>

All these styles call for the acquisition and display of certain commodities, and the infinite fracturing into different styles such as ‘romantic, girly look’, ‘the urban chic style’<sup>27</sup> etc. is also visible in the images below, as certain consumer items and the particular way in which they are worn evoke specific identity labels and (implicit) identity and lifestyle discourses. Witness the hipster hijabi from London:

## Hipster Hijabi, London



Image 4. Hipster style <http://hotchicksinhijabs.com/>

And the gothic hijabista from Finland:

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.greenprophet.com/2011/01/eco-hijabs-on-rise/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://fashioningfaith.blogspot.com/>

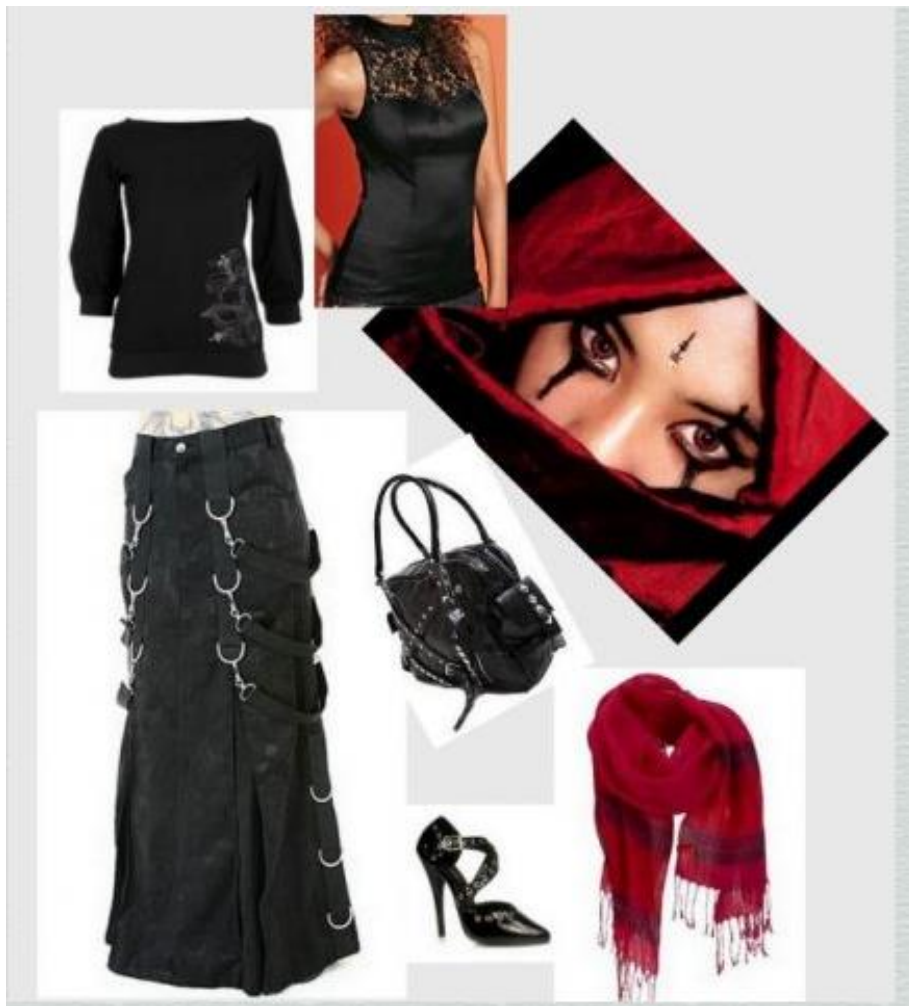


Image 5. Gothic style <http://vaatekaappi.vuodatus.net/>

As we have seen above, accents are (sometimes very heavily) accessorised, and it is clear that the accessories that contribute to the creation of a hipster accent would not work in the making of the gothic one, and vice versa. For the hijabista, the accessorising can mean minute details such as pins:



SHOP BY CATEGORY
HIJABZ»
HIJAB SASH
SCARF BANDS
SPECIAL OFFERS!
KEEP PINZ SAFE!»
Swarovski Crystal Pins
Blinging Pinz
Crystal Roses
Dainty Diamonds
Dangling Pins
Rhinestones
Snowflakes
Sparkles
Flower Power
Hearts
Chain Pins
Stick Pins
U Clips
Mix & Match Sets
Khaleeji Bobble
Plain Pashminas
Printed shawls
Square Scarves»
Stylish Bonnets»
Slides
Brooches»
Coilless Pins
Extra's»
Wholesale

Image 6. <http://pinzpinzpinz.co.uk/>

Just by looking at the list, we can conjure up images of different hijabistas: snowflakes, Swarovski crystal pins, hearts and Blinging Pinz all evoke different accents. All of these details provide alternative alignments with recognizable styles in public. And such details must be brought 'in order', so to speak, by means of a micropolitics of the self: a delicately organized collection of nonrandom forms of behavior producing that specific 'self'. We shall have a look at a video that presents all the detailed practices of arrangement needed for a

certain kind of style, for a certain kind of occasion – requiring a certain kind of accent.

The video is titled “OOTD #1 Date Night!”<sup>28</sup>, OOTD referring to ‘Outfit of the Day’. The young woman presenting the outfit is “going out with family and a dinner out with her ‘hubby’” – hence a specific ‘date night’ outfit, naturally composed of specific details and consumer items. She starts the video by introducing her head wear, and the constituent parts of the hijab (Image 7).



Image 7. The constituent parts of the hijab

This is followed by a detailed explanation on what else she is wearing, starting with the top – a ‘babydoll turtleneck’ (Images 8 and 9).

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<sup>28</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz-WEBv8K\\_w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xz-WEBv8K_w)

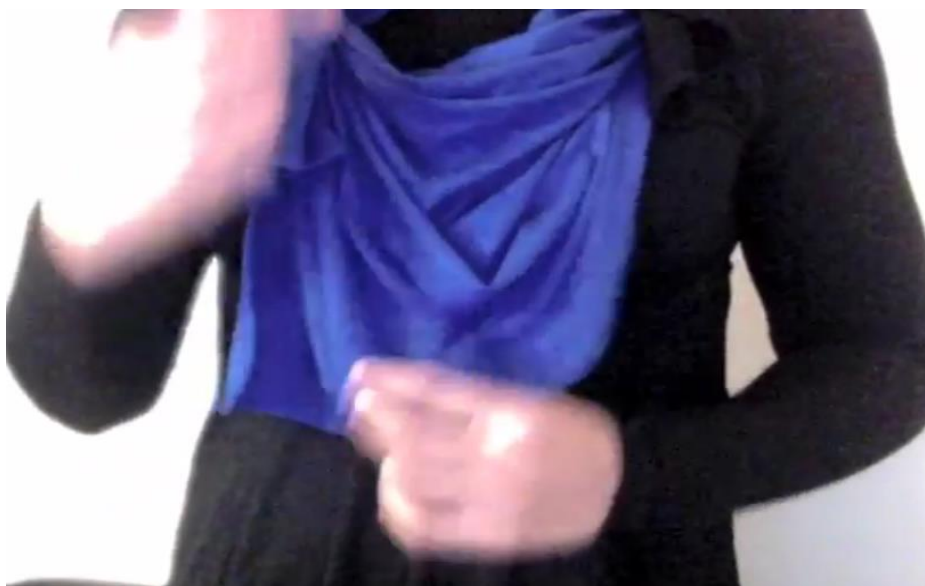


Image 8. The hijab worn with a babydoll turtleneck



Image 9. The babydoll turtleneck

She then points to the accessories she is wearing – earrings and a ring (Images 10 and 11)



Image 10. Accessories: earrings



Image 11. Accessories: a ring

The choice of these particular accessories is by no means random, as illustrated by Image 12.



Image 12. Keeping it simple with the accessories

Here, the focus on the accessories and 'keeping it simple' with them, because "I have kind of a lot of stuff going on up here. So everything else is simple and I'm wearing blue jeans." The specific head cover worn, then, dictates the accessories worn. The blue jeans already mentioned are also qualified not simply as 'blue jeans', but as "just boot cut so not too tight" (Image 13).

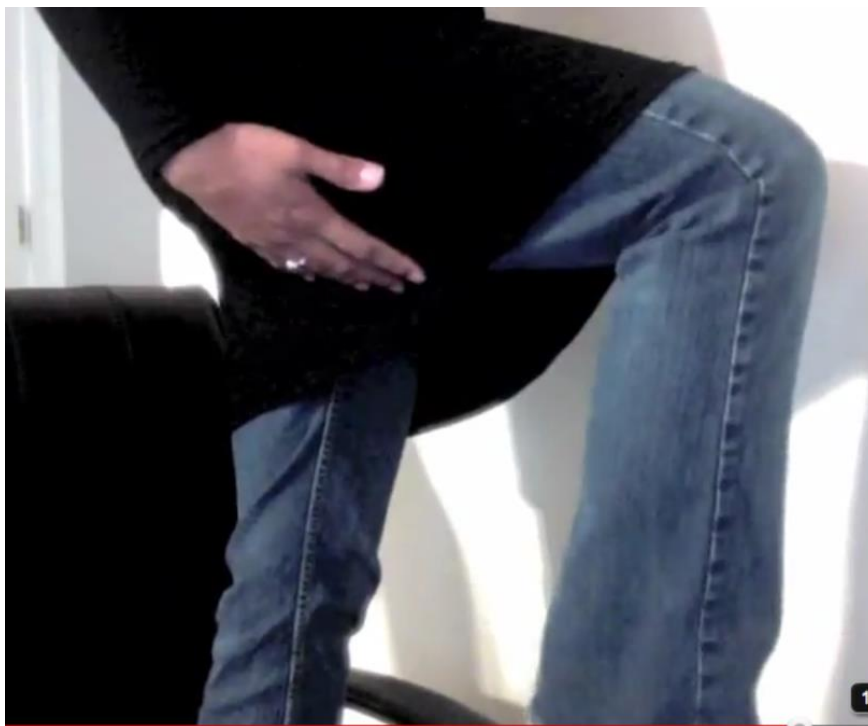


Image 13. Blue jeans (“just boot cut so not too tight”)

Neither does the babydoll turtleneck pass without further elaboration (Image 14):



Image 14. “Baby doll turtle neck comes up to my knees”

Finally, we return to the head wear, which is qualified as ‘medium-size’ (Image 15):



Image 15. Medium-size scrunchie for volume

And we end by zooming into the 'medium-size' head wear that is there 'for volume' (Image 16):



Image 16. Zooming in on the (medium) volume

Importantly, we also get to know how to acquire (some of) these items to be able to create this 'date night outfit' for ourselves:



Uploaded by [Hijabista786](#) on Jan 3, 2012

My first Outfit of the Day video! Have a look and please let me know what you think!

Hijab:

Jasmine Hijab Black and Blue:

<http://www.hijab-ista.com/Hijabs/Jasmine>

Underscarf:

Glitzy Creased Underscarf Blue:

<http://www.hijab-ista.com/UNDERSCARVES/Glitzy>

Top:

BabyDoll Turtle Neck:

<http://www.hijab-ista.com/Clothing/TurtleNeck>

Please Like us on Facebook.com/Hijabista !!

Please Subscribe to our Youtube channel !!

Image 17. Where you can buy the pieces of clothing shown on the video (caption to the video)

Having watched this video, we now know how to create a 'date night outfit' that is 'hijabista'. On the surface this does not seem like too complicated a creation, but as we learn throughout the video, there are details one is supposed to pay attention to (the blue jeans are 'not too tight'; the head cover is 'medium'; the accessories worn should be few). Getting it right requires the acquisition of certain consumer commodities that are then ordered in a particular way for a particular effect – and in this as in many other cases online, these items are conveniently made purchasable by just a click of the mouse – one's specific and desired identity is only a link away. Implied in all of this is of course meticulous care of one's self and attention to detail such as what specific amount of accessories will be successful with a particular head scarf. In 'how to', knowing what is too much and what is too little is crucial.

## Conclusion

Although the demands of recognizability and the identity templates of consumer culture keep our accents in check, in a superdiverse world of global flows, articulations and identities become less and less predictable. The 'super-semiotics' of the internet provide for the easy creation and fast publication of potentially infinite creation of accents – and infinitely fractured range and scope of 'how to'.

While the emphasis on hardly noticeable details is by no means restricted to the Hijabistas – we see it rather as a constant element in the micropolitics of identity,

see Blommaert & Varis (2012) – it surely helps Hijabistas to maneuver the field of conflict and contestation in which their practices are set. As noted earlier, the hijab is the object of heated debates, and while the Hijabistas clearly violate the demarcation of ‘hijab versus not hijab’ imposed from within certain branches of Islam, they also clearly violate public perceptions of Western modernity and male-female equality.

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## Chapter 4:

### Life Projects and light communities

In line with the discussions in the previous chapters, , we will attempt to sketch in what follows a realistic and empirically sustainable research program, focusing on the actual patterns of behavior that people display as bases, or indexicals, for defining identities, avoiding a priori categorizations and rejecting the exclusivity of explicitly identitarian metadiscourses as a research object in the study of identities. What people explicitly tell about identity is too often a very poor indicator of, and stands in an awkward relationship with, their actual identity articulating practices. Instead, we shall focus on observable behavior in connection to what we can call a micropolitics of identity – the presence and function of ‘ordering scripts’ in which various micro-practical features are brought into line with each other, and together, as an orderly ‘package’, create recognizable meanings.

In what follows, we will describe such practices and the orderly way in which they occur as “life projects”. Adding to this, we will then suggest to view the specific kinds of ‘groupness’ that emerge from such practices as “focused but diverse”. Both notions will be introduced here in their most sketchy forms and without much reference to existing literature – the attempt here is to incite discussion and hypothesis testing through research, and even blunt and unfinished notional or analytic tools can be helpful in this process.


#### Life Projects

In earlier chapters, we emphasized (a) that contemporary identity work revolves strongly around *consumption*, as predicted half a century ago by Marcuse (1964); (b) that identity work, oriented towards ‘authenticity’, appears to involved complex ‘dosings’ of emblematic features; (c) within a rather narrow bandwidth of difference. Marcuse argued that identities are dislodged from the ‘grand politics’ of submission to or revolt against the political and economic system. Identities defined by orientations to specific commodities are thus depoliticized identities, identities that refer only to themselves and not to larger power structures.

Our earlier chapters responded, we think, to this line of argument in three ways: (a) the ‘grand politics’ has not truly left the orbit of identity, but has been replaced by a micropolitics of “care of the self” that connects it in different ways to larger-scale political relations and social structures (Foucault 2007); and (b) this means that rather than *depoliticization*, we observe intense forms of *repoliticization*, oriented towards multiple, often ephemeral and temporary, but nonetheless compelling patterns of *order*, now dispersed over a vast terrain of everyday behaviors; (c) leading to limited forms of agency within a general structure of submission, perhaps aptly captured by the notion of “prosumer”: while submitting to the orders of consumption, people do *produce* something new, specific and unique – “culture as accent”. These three points are the takeoff position for what follows.

Let us consider two ordinary examples of contemporary advertisement, both referring to automobiles. Figure 1, a Mercedes Benz ad, projects the purchase of a car onto “a belief”. Note that in the ad, the car itself is not visible: we just see the iconic sign of the brand; what dominates the ad is the statement that buying a Mercedes Benz – *any* Mercedes Benz – is more than the purchase of a useful object: it is the purchase of a mythologized object (in the sense of Barthes 1957), an overdetermined object that bespeaks a vision, a set of ideals, a particular attitude in life. Purchasing a Mercedes Benz means buying *an identity*, and when you drive this vehicle, you *express* that identity (or so it is suggested).

BMW takes another route in Figure 2. Here, the object – the car – is connected to the role of a father and his relationship with his children. The connection with (gendered!) identity is explicit here: “How do you become ‘best daddy in the world’?” The answer: by buying a BMW. You will “impress his friends” and make your child so happy.



YOU'RE NOT BUYING A CAR.  
YOU'RE BUYING A BELIEF.

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**T**HE NOTION OF BUILDING A MERCEDES-BENZ HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN EXCEPTIONALLY MEANINGFUL ENDEAVOR. MORE THAN MAKING A MACHINE, WE ARE UPHOLDING AN IDEAL. MORE THAN SIMPLY TURNING OUT NEW MODELS, WE ARE ADVANCING AN ENTIRE INDUSTRY WITH EVERY NEW INNOVATION.


From the very beginning, from the moment we built the first automobile back in 1886, the world was watching. Learning. Adoring. We won races, design awards and recognition for safety developments. In turn, we earned the respect of every true automobile aficionado the world over.

2006 will be no different. The introduction of the new S-Class will once again raise the industry to new heights. In technology, design, performance and luxury, the car unveils an altogether unprecedented level of achievement. And demonstrates a belief that as long as we strive for the highest possible level of integrity in everything we do, there will be people on this earth who appreciate it.

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Unlike any other.

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Mercedes-Benz

Figure 1: Mercedes Benz advertisement



Figure 2: BMW advertisement.

We have grown accustomed to such forms of advertisement in which the commodity is loaded, so to speak, with intricate sets of personality features, and in which the purchase of that commodity, thus, becomes a way of buying those features of personality that are contained, as a crucial and defining characteristic, in the commodity. One, thus, buys an indexical, and such acts of consumption are always, and instantly, acts of identity. This is the reason why the commodity itself does not need to be displayed in ads: its not so much the commodity we desire, it is the identity indexical that comes with the commodity. We buy the "adjectives", to paraphrase Barthes.

We have also seen in Figure 1 that we do not necessarily need to purchase a specific object: buying a *brand* is sufficient. The "adjectives" – the identity indexicals – are attached to brands, more than to specific objects. Figure 3 shows an example of how one can literally become the brand. The young woman depicted in it is said to be "librarian by day, *Bacardi* by night".



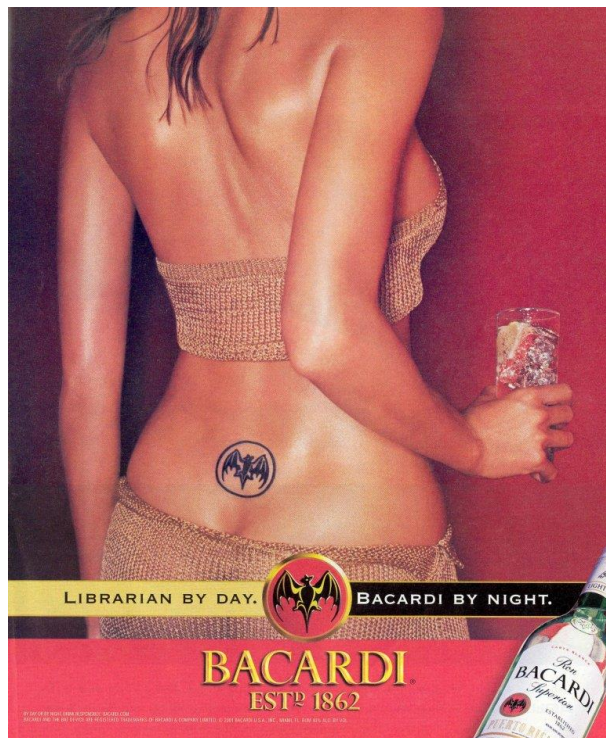


Figure 3: Bacardi ad.

The point here is to observe how commodities are linearly connected to identity features. Buying an object, preferably one with a recognizable brand, enables one to “become the brand”, i.e. to approach the identity archetypes indexically lodged in the brand. Young women drinking Bacardi, thus, can come closer to the attractive party girl suggested in Figure 3; a man buying a BMW can come closer to the ideal of “the best daddy in the world”.

Objects and brands, thus, propose *elements of stories of the self* to their prospective customers. And so, whenever we buy something, we can provide an *account or rationalization* of this particular purchase *with respect to who we are*. I can explain my preference for a BMW to others by arguing that I am a family man; I can explain my predilection for Bacardi by arguing that I am not just a (rather stuffy) librarian during the day but also a party girl at night.

Consumption, thus, becomes an essential ingredient in an escalating *culture of accountability* (escalating notably due to the use of social media) in which every aspect of our being and our lives can be questioned by others, and needs to be motivated, explained, rationalized. I buy an Apple computer, and I am supposed to explain this *specific* purchase by referring it to aspects of my personality. Answering “well, I just needed a PC” or “oh, I never thought of it” are dispreferred responses to questions about the reasons why we bought that specific PC. We are expected to be knowledgeable in the hugely complex field of *specific* indexicalities attached to *specific* brands and products, and we are expected to be competent in constructing such indexical accounts about the details of our consumption behavior. Consumption has been broken down into a cosmos of infinitesimally small meaningful chunks in which specific products project specific bits of identity. Bourdieu’s (1984) distinction appears to have achieved extreme forms of specialization.

Consumption, of course, is not a homogeneous field; buying a BMW is an activity that occurs in another zone of life than buying a Bacardi cocktail in a club, organic vegetables for dinner or a specific shower gel for everyday use. We made this point in earlier papers: specific zones of life and being are subject to specific microhegemonies. For every zone, we have the choice between a variety of 'scripts' that bring order to the potentially chaotic field of consumption-and-identity. Getting ready for work in the morning involves handling a dozen or more commodities, from the shower gel and toothpaste we use in the bathroom, over the dress, shoes, make-up and perfume we wear, to the organic breakfast cereals we eat and the low-fat milk we pour into our cup of fair trade coffee.

If we would see such stages of a day in terms of 'ideological' coherence – a symphony of dozens of indexicals all collapsing nicely into a coherent 'me' – we would find a cacophonous and internally contradictory complex. While my preference for organic cereals and fair trade coffee might bespeak an 'ecological' orientation, the skin lotion I use might be tested on animals, the low-fat milk can be produced in fully industrialized conditions, and the shower gel can contain seriously polluting phosphates. The thing is that *every separate item* in this complex has its own 'logic', so to speak, and that we do not perceive the bundling of a range of different items into a complex activity such as getting ready for work as one complex, but rather as a sequence of separate orientations to specific commodities, each of which provides a reasonably plausible account of 'me'.

This does not preclude adherence to larger 'scripts' that organize bundles of such features. The cacophonous complex of features can still be shot through by arrangements that combine a multitude of details into more elaborate identity scripts or genres, that allow a measure of deviance while displaying instant 'total' recognizability. Figure 4 (an image already encountered in the previous chapter) might illustrate this; it is an image we found when entering "managers" into Google Images.



Figure 4: "managers"



The gentlemen in the picture are both cleanly shaven, attractive, and wear a dark suit and necktie; the ladies are young, attractive, dressed in white shirts and (with one exception) dark jackets and have their hair either loose or tied into a knot. They drink water or soft drinks; all of them carry writing equipment. We do not see piercings or visible tattoos, no unshaven male chins, no uncombed hair, no silly coffee mugs. What we see here is the recognizability of a collection, or *collocation* of features, that makes a reading of ‘managers’ more plausible than, say, ‘a group of philosophers discussing Schopenhauer’. The microhegemonies attached to specific objects and features can also be grouped into genres, and knowledgeability of individual indexicals needs to be accompanied by knowledgeability of such bundles of features.

This is where the notion of ‘life projects’ enters the picture. Our everyday lives, thus observed, become complex projects in which almost every aspect, from the very big to the very small, requires elaborate forms of accounting and explanation to others, and requires elaborate ‘ordering’ work in attempts to “be ourselves” – more precisely, in attempts to be *recognized* as the specific person I try to offer for ratification by others. “Project” here retains its intrinsic semantic ambivalence: we turn our existence into a project that demands perpetual work, elaboration, adjustment, change, transformation; and we do that by means of indexical ‘projections’ in which possession and display of a feature – my shoes, my car – triggers recognizable identity features. I arrive in my BMW at work, which makes me a “BMW guy”. I take my iPad from the car, which makes me an “Apple guy”. I walk in wearing my Boss suit, which makes me a “Boss guy”, and the receptionist is exposed to my Davidoff after-shave fragrance, which makes me a “Davidoff guy”, and so forth. At any moment of our everyday existence, thus, we are readable patchworks of recognizable micro-signs, each of which can be picked up by others and converted into identity projections.

Life projects are highly dynamic and subject to substantial, and rapid, change. The readable patchwork we were at the age of 17 differs tremendously from the one we became at the age of 30. Changes in fashion, general preference, or technological standards trigger vast and pervasive changes in the way we consume and, thus, can or have to “be ourselves”. We repeat that “being ourselves” – widely believed to be something that we construct autonomously, with almost unlimited agentivity – is very much a matter of uptake and ratification by others. We can only “be ourselves” if and when others recognize and understand us as such. And evidently, this process is not restricted to what we would identify as the mainstream of society; it is as pervasive and as compelling in subcultures and in what Howard Becker (1963) a long time ago described as communities of “outsiders”.

### **Light communities**

The groups that emerge out of the complex patterns of life projects described above are best seen as *focused but diverse occasioned coagulations* of people. People converge or coagulate around a shared focus – an object, a shared interest, another person, an event. This focusing is occasioned in the sense that it is triggered by a specific prompt, bound in time and space (even in ‘virtual’ space), and thus not necessarily ‘eternal’ in nature. This is why such forms of

coagulation should not be seen as creating uniformity or homogeneity: the people thus coagulating around a shared focus remain as diverse as before and after, in the sense that their identities remain as complex and multi-readable as before and after. Such coagulations, recall, were dismissed by Goffman as not being true “social groups” (Goffman 1961: 8-13), because Goffman restricted the notion of “social group” to formations that bore the traditional characteristics of “thick” communities in the Durkheimian tradition.

But let us examine the matter in some detail. Take a group of people watching a football game in a pub. In all likelihood, while some of these people may know each other we cannot assume any degree of ‘deep’ affinity among those people. They converge on a shared focus, the game, which is a specific and unique occasion, but is also part of a genre of such occasions – football games broadcast in a pub. We see an amazingly robust group. During the game, these people will share an enormous degree of similarity in behavior, will experience a sense of almost intimate closeness and a vast amount of cognitive and emotional sharedness. A goal will provoke mass cheering, a missed chance provokes general distress and shouts of disappointment. Since they are in a pub, most if not all of them will consume drinks – while few, if any of them will order a meal during the game. And as soon as the game is over, the robust group will dissipate in no time. Several smaller groups will form, people will leave, and the patterns of behavior and interaction dominantly displayed during the game will vanish and be replaced by entirely different ones. The diversity that characterized the group, even while displaying tremendous uniformity during the event – re-emerges as soon as the moment of focusing is over. We see here what Goffman observed as “an extremely full array of interaction processes” (1961: 11); but contrary to what Goffman suggested with respect to e.g. poker players, the participants in such focused practices do display, enact and embody a *strong sense of group membership* – one not replacing their traditional “thick” identities such as nationality, gender, social class, ethnicity and so forth, but a sense of group membership that might *complement* or, in some circumstances, even *accentuate* and *intensify* the “thick” community identities (as when one’s national team is at work). Such identities are part of identity repertoires and can be invoked in complex interactions with other elements from the repertoire, in which the specific “package” would be *the* identity presented to others for appraisal.

So let us not too quickly dismiss such groups as unimportant. We spend very important parts of our lives in such ephemeral forms of groupness. When our morning train is late again, we find ourselves in conversations with other strangers on the platform, voicing amazingly similar complaints; the moment the train pulls in, these interactions cease and we return to habituated patterns of behavior – minding one’s own business on a train. A traffic accident or another calamity likewise provokes coagulations of highly diverse people into tremendously uniform groups. And while the ‘managers’ in Figure 4 appear like a very solid group in this picture of a “meeting”, nothing will prevent the participants from drifting off into entirely different directions as soon as the meeting finishes. The common features that enabled the closeness of groupness during the moment of focusing do not neutralize the many other, diverse features that each participant displays and can enact, and as soon as the joint

focus is lifted, each participant can return to an entirely different set of alignments based on entirely different features. Imagine, just for fun, that when the managers in Figure 4 end their meeting and walk off, the young man in the picture asks the blonde woman whether she would be interested in going to a Dire Straits concert together – he can get tickets; an entirely new set of features would become the stuff for coagulation at that point. And if they get to that concert, entirely different features of their identities will enable them to focus on the event, and will contribute to, again, a colossal robustness as a group. They will cheer simultaneously with thousands of other people, and they will even sing “Sultans of Swing” along with, and in precisely the same beat as thousands of people otherwise entirely unknown to them. All of these features were already present around the meeting table in Figure 4.

Contrary to Goffman, thus, we see no reason why we should consider such focused-but-diverse groups to be fundamentally different from (or for that matter, inferior to) “thick” (Durkheimian) communities such as, for instance, “nations”, “ethnicities”, “religious communities” or what not. In the kind of empirical heuristics we try to develop here, focusing around such ‘big’ and ‘thick’ identity elements is not necessarily more frequently or more intensely done than focusing around mundane events (such as train delays or a Dire Straits concert). We are not saying that features such as nationality or ethnicity are *absent* when people start chatting on a railway platform; we say, however, that they do not provide the triggers for focusing as a group at that moment, and that it is good to take that empirical *point de repère* seriously in our analyses of contemporary identities. Other features of identity can become relevant in the eyes of bystanders or after the fact – imagine two young people falling in love with each other and starting a relationship, which turns out to be solid gossip material for others because both are active politicians attached to parties that are otherwise each other’s ideological adversaries. As we emphasized, the diversity characterizing the group does not disappear during moments of intense focusing; it remains a potential for multiple readings and interpretations that can be exploited at any point by anyone who can recognize the relevant features. Refocusing by others – here is the crucial aspect of uptake and ratification again – is also perpetually possible.

If we now briefly return to the consumption culture we used as our point of departure here, we see how multiple “light” groups are continuously formed around shared aspects of individual life projects. All BMW drivers, in spite of enormous and fundamental differences between them, share a potential focus with each other: the brand of their cars. If they do not do this focusing themselves, others can (“oh hell, there’s another arrogant BMW driver!!”). People sharing a preference for particular brands can find each other, even during very short moments, in very focused “brand fan” groups on social media. The “like” button on Facebook is that medium’s sublime instrument for brief moments of focusing, in which people otherwise unrelated or unconnected can find themselves liking, at the same time and in the same space, the latest iPhone type or the new album of Shakira for instance.

It is not likely that we will understand, and be able to realistically generalize, contemporary “identity” unless we take into account these complex, ephemeral,

layered, dynamic and unstable patterns of identity construction, identity ratification and group formation. Even more: we risk not understanding it at all when we fail to address patterns of identity processes that dominate enormous segments of our lives and are, empirically, clearly objects of intense concern for enormous numbers of people, who invest amazing amounts of resources and energy into them. Social and cultural phenomena should not be too quickly dismissed as irrelevant because they do not appear on our theoretical and analytical radars at present; if they occur and prove to be of significance in the social and cultural life of people, we at least need to examine them critically.

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## Chapter 5:

### Conviviality and collectives on social media:

### Virality, memes and new social structures

#### Introduction

In a very insightful and relatively early paper on the phenomenon, Vincent Miller (2008) questions the 'content' of communication on social media and microblogs (Facebook and Twitter, respectively), and concludes:

"We are seeing how in many ways the internet has become as much about interaction with others as it has about accessing information. (...) In the drift from blogging, to social networking, to microblogging we see a shift from dialogue and communication between actors in a network, where the point of the network was to facilitate an exchange of substantive content, to a situation where the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus. (...) This has resulted in a rise of what I have called 'phatic media' in which communication without content has taken precedence." (Miller 2008: 398)

Miller sees the avalanche of 'empty' messages on new social media as an illustration of the 'postsocial' society in which networks rather than (traditional, organic) communities are the central fora for establishing social ties between people. The messages are 'empty' in the sense that no perceptibly 'relevant content' is being communicated; thus, such messages are typologically germane to the kind of 'small talk' which Bronislaw Malinowski (1923 (1936)) identified as 'phatic communion' and described as follows:

"'phatic communion' serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas." (Malinowski 1923 (1936): 316)

For Malinowski, phatic communion was a key argument for his view that language should not just be seen as a carrier of propositional contents ("communicating ideas" in the fragment above), but as a *mode of social action* the scope of which should not be reduced to 'meaning' in the denotational sense of the term. In an excellent paper on the history of the term 'phatic communion', Gunter Senft notes the post-hoc reinterpretation of the term by Jakobson (1960) as 'channel-oriented' interaction, and describes phatic communion as

"utterances that are said to have exclusively social, bonding functions like establishing and maintaining a friendly and harmonious atmosphere in interpersonal relations, especially during the opening and closing stages of social – verbal – encounters. These utterances are understood as a means for keeping the communication channels open." (Senft 1995: 3)

Senft also emphasizes the difference between ‘communion’ and ‘communication’. Malinowski never used the term phatic ‘communication’, and for a reason: ‘communion’ stresses (a) the ritual aspects of phatic phenomena, and (b) the fact that through phatic communion, people express their sense of ‘union’ with a community. We will come back to this later on.

When it came to explaining the phenomenon, Malinowski saw the fear of silence, understood as an embarrassing situation in interaction among Trobriand Islanders, as the motive underlying the frequency of phatic communion. In order not to appear grumpy or taciturn to the interlocutor, Trobrianders engaged in sometimes lengthy exchanges of ‘irrelevant’ talk. While Malinowski saw this *horror vacui* as possibly universal, Dell Hymes cautioned against such an interpretation and suggested that “the distribution of required and preferred silence, indeed, perhaps most immediately reveals in outline form a community’s structure of speaking” (Hymes 1972 (1986): 40; see Senft 1995: 4-5 for a discussion). There are indeed communities where, unless one has anything substantial to say, silence is strongly preferred over small talk and ‘phatic communion’ would consequently be experienced as an unwelcome violation of social custom. This is clearly not the case in the internet communities explored by Vincent Miller, where ‘small’ and ‘content-free’ talk appears to be if not the rule, then certainly a very well entrenched mode of interaction.

This, perhaps, compels us to take ‘phatic’ talk seriously, given that it is so hard to avoid as a phenomenon in e.g. social media. And this, then, would be a correction to a deeply ingrained linguistic and sociolinguistic mindset, in which ‘small talk’ – the term itself announces it – is perceived as not really important and not really in need of much in-depth exploration.

Schegloff’s (1972; Schegloff & Sacks 1973) early papers on conversational openings and closings described these often routinized sequences as a mechanism in which speaker and hearer roles were established and confirmed. This early interpretation shows affinity with Malinowski’s ‘phatic communion’ – the concern with the ‘channel’ of communication – as well as with Erving Goffman’s (1967) concept of ‘interaction ritual’ in which people follow particular, relatively perduring templates that safeguard ‘order’ in face-to-face interaction. In an influential later paper, however, Schegloff (1988) rejected Goffman’s attention to ‘ritual’ and ‘face’ as instances of ‘psychology’ (in fact, as too much interested in the *meaning* of interaction), and reduced the Goffmanian rituals to a more ‘secularized’ study of interaction as a formal ‘syntax’ in which human intentions and subjectivities did not matter too much. The question of *what* people seek to achieve by means of ‘small talk’, consequently, led a life on the afterburner of academic attention since then – when it occurred it was often labelled as ‘mundane’ talk, that is: talk that demands not to be seen as full of substance and meaning, but can be analyzed merely as an instance of the universal formal mechanisms of human conversation (Briggs 1997 provides a powerful critique of this). Evidently, when the formal patterns of phatic communion are the sole locus of interest, not much is left to be said on the topic.

As mentioned, the perceived plenitude of phatic communion on the internet pushes us towards attention to such ‘communication without content’. In what

follows, we will engage with this topic and focus on a now-current internet phenomenon: memes. Memes will be introduced in the next section, and we shall focus on (a) the notion of ‘viral spread’ in relation to agentivity and consciousness, and (b) the ways in which we can see ‘memes’, along with perhaps many of the phenomena described by Miller, as forms of conviviality. In a concluding section, we will identify some perhaps important implications of this view.

## Going viral

On January 21, 2012 Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg posted an update on his Facebook timeline, introduced by “Here’s some interesting weekend reading” (Figure 1). The message itself was 161 words long, and it led to a link to a 2000-word article. Within 55 seconds of being posted, the update got 932 “likes” and was “shared” 30 times by other Facebook users. After two minutes, the update had accumulated 3,101 “likes” and 232 “shares”.



Figure 1: Screenshot of Zuckerberg’s status update on Facebook, January 2012.

Given the structure and size of the text sent around by Zuckerberg, it is quite implausible that within the first two minutes or so, more than 3,000 people had already *read* Zuckerberg’s update and the article which it provides a link to, deliberated on its contents and judged it ‘likeable’, and the same goes for the more than 200 times that the post had already been shared on other users’ timelines. So what is happening here?

Some of the uptake can probably be explained with ‘firsting’, i.e. the preoccupation to be the first to comment on or like an update on social media – most clearly visible in the form of comments simply stating “first!”. Another major explanation could be ‘astroturfing’: it is plausible that many of those who



“like” and “share” Zuckerberg’s update are in fact Facebook employees deliberately attempting to increase its visibility. We can guess, but we simply do not know. What we do know for sure, however, is that as a consequence of a first level of uptake – people liking and sharing the post – there are further and further levels of uptake, as other users witness this liking and sharing activity (some of it may already be showing in the figures here), and consequently make inferences about the meaning of the post itself, but also about the person(s) in their network who reacted to it. Further layers of contextualisation are thus added to the original post which may have an influence on the uptake by others.

Different social media platforms offer similar activity types: YouTube users can “view” videos and “like” them, as well as adding “comments” to them and adding videos to a profile list of preferences; Twitter users can create “hashtags” (a form of metadata-based “findability” of text, Zappavigna 2011: 792) and “retweet” tweets from within their network; similar operations are possible on Instagram as well as on most local or regional social media platforms available throughout the world. Each time, we see that specific activities are made available for the rapid “viral” spread of particular signs, while the actual content or formal properties of those signs do not seem to prevail as criteria for sharing, at least not when these properties are understood as denotational-semantic or aesthetic in the Kantian sense. We shall elaborate this below. The ace of virality after the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is undoubtedly the South-Korean music video called *Gangnam Style*, performed by an artist called Psy: *Gangnam Style* was posted on YouTube on 15 July, 2012, and had been viewed 2,065552172 times on 18 August 2014. Competent as well as lay observers appear to agree that the phenomenal virality of *Gangnam Style* was not due to the intrinsic qualities, musical, choreographic or otherwise, of the video. The hype was driven by entirely different forces.

The point to all of this however, is that we see a communicative phenomenon of astonishing *speed* and *scope*: large numbers of people react on a message by expressing their “liking” and by judging it relevant enough to “share” it with huge numbers of “friends” within their social media community. At the same time, in spite of Zuckerberg’s message being *textual*, it was not read in the common sense understanding of this term. The “like” and “share” reactions, consequently, refer to another kind of decoding and understanding than the ones we conventionally use in text and discourse analysis – “meaning” as an outcome of denotational-textual decoding is not at stake here, and so the “liking” and “sharing” is best seen as “phatic” in the terms discussed above. Yet, these phatic activities appear to have extraordinary importance for those who perform them, as “firsting” and “astroturfing” practices illustrate: people on social media find it very important to be involved in “virality”. People find it important to be part of a group that “likes” and “shares” items posted by others. It is impossible to know – certainly in the case of Zuckerberg – who the members of this group effectively are (this is the problem of scope, and we shall return to it), but this ignorance of identities of group members does seem to matter less than the expression of membership by means of phatic “likes” and “shares”. What happens here is “communion” in the sense of Malinowski: identity statements expressing, pragmatically and metapragmatically, membership of some group. Such groups are not held together by high levels of awareness and knowledge of deeply shared values and

functions – the classical community of Parsonian sociology – but by loose bonds of shared, even if superficial interest or “ambient affiliation” in Zappavigna’s terms (2011: 801), enabled by technological features of social media affording forms of searchability and findability of “like”-minded people.

We need to be more specific though, and return to our Facebook example. “Liking” is an identity statement *directly* oriented towards the author of the update – Zuckerberg – and *indirectly* inscribing oneself into the community of those who “like” Zuckerberg, as well as *indirectly* flagging something to one’s own community of Facebook “friends” (who can monitor activities performed within the community). Patricia Lange, thus, qualifies such responsive uptake activities (“viewing” YouTube videos in her case) as forms of “self-interpellation”: people express a judgment that they themselves belong to the intended audiences of a message or sign (2009: 71). “Sharing”, by contrast, recontextualizes and *directly* reorients this statement towards one’s own community, triggering another phase in a process of viral circulation, part of which can – but must not – involve real “reading” of the text. Also, “liking” is a responsive uptake to someone else’s activity while “sharing” is the initiation of another activity directed at another (segment of a) community. So, while both activities share important dimensions of phaticity with each other, important differences also occur. These distinctions, as noted, do not affect the fundamental nature of the interaction between actors and signs – “sharing”, as we have seen, does not presuppose careful reading of the text – but there are differences in agency and activity type.

This is important to note, because existing definitions of virality would emphasize the *absence of significant change* in the circulation of the sign. Limor Shifman (2011: 190), for instance, emphasizes the absence of significant change to the sign itself to distinguish virality from “memicity”: memes, as opposed to viral signs, would involve changes to the sign itself. We shall see in a moment that this distinction is only valid when one focuses on a superficial inspection of the formal properties of signs. When one takes social semiotic activities as one’s benchmark, however, things become more complicated and more intriguing. We have seen that significant distinctions apply to “liking” and “sharing”. In fact, we can see both as different *genres* on a gradient from phatic *communion* to phatic *communication*: there are differences in agency, in the addressees and communities targeted by both activities, and in the fundamental pragmatic and metapragmatic features of both activities.

To clarify the latter: “sharing” an update on Facebook is a classic case of “re-entextualization” (Bauman & Briggs 1990; Silverstein & Urban 1996) or “re-semiotization” (Scollon & Scollon 2004). Re-entextualization refers to the process by means of which a piece of “text” (a broadly defined semiotic object here) is extracted from its original context-of-use and re-inserted into an entirely different one, involving different participation frameworks, a different kind of textuality – an entire text can be condensed into a quote, for instance – and ultimately also very different meaning outcomes – what is marginal in the source text can become important in the re-entextualized version, for instance. Re-semiotization, in line with the foregoing, refers to the process by means of which every “repetition” of a sign involves an entirely new set of contextualization

conditions and thus results in an entirely “new” semiotic process, allowing new semiotic modes and resources to be involved in the repetition process (Leppänen et al. 2014). The specific affordances for responsive and sharing activities offered by social media platforms are thus not unified or homogeneous: we can distinguish a gradient from purely responsive uptake to active and redirected re-entextualization and resemiotization, blurring the distinction made by Shifman between virality and memicity.

Let us have a closer look at memes now, and focus again on the different genres of memic activity we can discern.

### **The weird world of memes**

As we have seen, Shifman locates the difference between virality and memicity in the degree to which the sign itself is changed in the process of transmission and circulation. Memes are signs the formal features of which have been changed by users. Shifman draws on Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene* (1976), who coined “meme” by analogy with “gene” as “small cultural units of transmission (...) which are spread by copying or imitation” (Shifman 2011: 188). We have already seen, however, that even simple “copying” or “imitation” activities such as Facebook “sharing” involve a major shift in activity type called re-entextualization. Memes – often multimodal signs in which images and texts are combined – would typically enable intense resemiotization as well, in that original signs are altered in various ways, generically germane – a kind of “substrate” recognizability would be maintained – but situationally adjusted and altered so as to produce very different communicative effects. Memes tend to have an extraordinary level of semiotic *productivity* which involves very different kinds of semiotic activity – genres, in other words.

Let us consider Figures 2-3-4 and 5-6-7. In Figure 2 we see the origin of a successful meme, a British World War II propaganda poster.



Figure 2: British wartime propaganda poster.

A virtually endless range of resemiotized versions of this poster went viral since the year 2000; they can be identified as intertextually related by the speech act structure of the message (an adhortative “keep calm” or similar statements, followed by a subordinate adhortative) and the graphic features of lettering and layout (larger fonts for the adhortatives, the use of a coat of arms-like image). Variations on the memic theme range from minimal to maximal, but the generic template is constant. Figure 3 shows a minimally resemiotized variant in which lettering and coat of arms (the royal crown) are kept, while in Figure 5, the royal crown has been changed by a beer mug.



Figure 3: Keep calm and call Batman



Figure 4: Keep calm and drink beer.

In Figures 2-3-4 we see how one set of affordances – the visual architecture of the sign and its speech act format – becomes the intertextual link enabling the infinite resemiotizations while retaining the original semiotic pointer: most users of variants of the meme would know that the variants derive from the same “original” meme. The visual architecture and speech act format of the “original”, thus, are the “mobile” elements in memicity here: they provide memic-intertextual recognizability, while the textual adjustments redirect the meme towards more specific audiences and reset it in different frames of meaning and use.

The opposite can also apply, certainly when memes are widely known because of textual-*stylistic* features: the actual ways in which “linguaging” is performed through fixed expressions and speech characteristics. A particularly successful example of such textual-stylistic memicity is so-called “lolspeak”, the particular pidginized English originally associated with funny images of cats (“lolcats”), but extremely mobile as a memic resource in its own right. Consider Figure 5-6-7. Figure 5 documents the origin of this spectacularly successful meme: a picture of a cat, to which the caption “I can has cheezburger?” was added, went viral in 2007 via a website “I can has cheezburger?”. The particular caption phrase went viral as well and became tagged to a wide variety of other images – see Figure 6. The caption, then, quickly became the basis for a particular pidginized variety of written English, which could in turn be deployed in a broad range of contexts (see Figure 7). The extraordinary productivity of this meme-turned-language-variety was demonstrated in 2010, when a team of “lolspeak” authors completed a translation of the entire Bible in their self-constructed language variety. The Lolcat Bible can now be purchased as a book through Amazon.



Figure 5: I can has cheezburger?



Figure 6: President and a possible voter having cheezburger

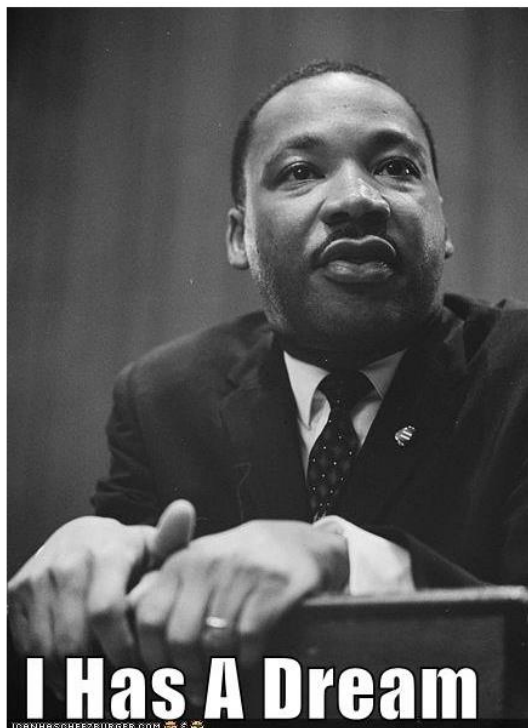


Figure 7: I has a dream.

The different resources that enter into the production of such memes can turn out to be memic in themselves; we are far from the “copying and imitating” used by Dawkins in his initial definition of memes. People, as we said, are

extraordinarily creative in reorganizing, redirecting and applying memic resources over a vast range of thematic domains, addressing a vast range of audiences while all the same retaining clear and recognizable intertextual links to the original memic sources. This fundamental intertextuality allows for *combined memes*, in which features of different established memes are blended in a “mashup” meme. Figure 8 shows such a mashup meme:



Figure 8: Keep calm and remove the arrow from your knee.

We see the familiar template of the “Keep calm” meme, to which a recognizable reference to another meme is added. The origin of this other meme, “then I took an arrow in the knee”, is in itself worthy of reflection, for it shows the essentially arbitrary nature of memic success. The phrase was originally uttered by characters from a video game “Skyrim” (Figure 9). The phrase is quite often repeated throughout the game, but this does not in itself offer an explanation for the viral spread of the expression way beyond the community of Skyrim gamers.



Figure 9: Skyrim scene “Then I took an arrow in the knee”



The phrase became wildly productive and can now be tagged to an almost infinite range of different expressions, each time retaining a tinge of its original apologetic character, and appearing in mashups, as we saw in Figure 8.

What we see in each of these examples is how memes operate via a combination of intertextual recognizability and individual creativity – individual users adding an “accent” to existing viral memes, in attempts to go viral with their own adapted version. The work of resemiotization involved in such processes can be complex and demanding. Mashup memes, for instance, involves elaborate knowledge of existing memes, an understanding of the affordances and limitations for altering the memes, and graphic, semiotic and technological skills to post them online. The different forms of resemiotization represent different genres of communicative action, ranging from maximally transparent refocusing of existing memes to the creation of very different and new memes, less densely connected to existing ones.

Two points need to be made now. First, we do not see such resemiotizations, even drastic and radical ones, as being fundamentally different from the “likes” and “shares” we discussed in the previous section. We have seen that “likes” and “shares” are already different genres characterized by very different activity patterns, orientations to addressees and audiences, and degrees of intervention in the original signs. The procedures we have reviewed here differ in degree but not in substance: they are, like “retweets”, “likes” and “shares”, re-entextualizations of existing signs, i.e. meaningful communicative operations that demand different levels of agency and creativity of the user. Second, and related to this, the nature of the original sign itself – its conventionally understood “meaning” – appears to be less relevant than the capacity to deploy it in largely phatic, relational forms of interaction, again ranging from what Malinowski described as “communion” – ritually expressing membership of a particular community – to “communication” *within* the communities we described as held together by “ambient affiliation”. “Meaning” in its traditional sense needs to give way here to a more general notion of “function”. Memes, just like Mark Zuckerberg’s status updates, do not need to be *read* in order to be seen and understood as denotationally and informationally meaningful; their use and re-use appear to be governed by the “phatic” and “emblematic” functions often seen as of secondary nature in discourse-analytic literature.

### **Conviviality on demand**

But what explains the immense density of such phatic forms of practice on social media? How do we make sense of the astonishing speed and scope with which such phatic forms of communion and communication circulate, creating – like in the case of Gangnam Style – perhaps the largest-scale collective communicative phenomena in human history? The explanations, we hope to have shown, do not necessarily have to be located in the features of the signs themselves, nor in the specific practices they prompt – both are unspectacular. So perhaps the explanations must be sought in the social world in which these phatic practices make sense.

In a seminal paper, Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2010: 120) distinguish between email and Twitter. They have this to say on the topic:

“(...) the difference between Twitter and email is that the latter is primarily a directed technology with people pushing content to persons listed in the “To:” field, while tweets are made available for interested individuals to pull on demand. The typical email has an articulated audience, while the typical tweet does not.”

The statement demands nuancing, for we have seen that even minimal forms of activity such as “sharing” involve degrees of audience design – the seemingly vacuous identity statements we described above, lodged in social media practices, are always directed at *some* audience, of which users have *some* idea, right or wrong (cf. Androutsopoulos 2013). Imaginary audiences are powerful actors affecting discursive behaviour, as Goffman and others have shown so often (e.g. Goffman 1963), and Marwick and boyd’s early statement that “Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one” – a phenomenon they qualify as “context collapse” – is surely in need of qualification (Marwick & boyd 2010: 122). The intricate social-semiotic work we have described here certainly indicates users having *diverse* understandings of audiences on social media. Different social media platforms offer opportunities for different types of semiotic and identity work, and users often hold very precise and detailed views of what specific platforms offer them in the way of audience access, identity and communication opportunities and effects (cf. Gershon 2010).

At the same time, Marwick and boyd are correct in directing our attention towards the kinds of communities in which people move on social media. In spite of precise ideas of specific target audiences and addressees, it is certainly true that there is no way in which absolute certainty about the identities (and numbers) of addressees can be ascertained on most social media platforms – something which Edward Snowden also made painfully clear. In addition, it is true that lump categories such as Facebook “friends” gather a range of – usually never explicitly defined – subcategories ranging from “real-life friends” and close relatives to what we may best call, following Goffman again, “acquaintances”. Goffman (1963), as we know, described acquaintances as that broad category of people within the network of US middle class citizens with whom relations of sociality and civility need to be maintained. Avoidance of overt neglect and rejection are narrowly connected to avoidance of intimacy and “transgressive” personal interaction: what needs to be maintained with such people is a relationship of *conviviality* – a level of social intercourse characterized by largely “phatic” and “polite” engagement in interaction. Acquaintances are not there to be “loved”, they are there to be “liked”. Facebook is made exactly for these kinds of social relationships (van Dijck 2013), which is perhaps also why a discourse analysis of Facebook interaction reveals the overwhelming dominance of the Gricean Maxims, that old ethnotheory of “polite” US bourgeois interaction (Varis forthcoming).

But let us delve slightly deeper into this. The communities present as audiences on social media may be at once over-imagined and under-determined: while users can have relatively precise ideas of who it is they are addressing, a level of

indeterminacy is inevitable in reality. This means, in analysis, that we cannot treat such communities in the traditional sense of “speech community” as a group of people tied together by clear and generally shareable rules of the indexical value and function of signs (Agha 2007). Indexical orders need to be built, as a consequence, since they cannot readily be presupposed. Virality, as a sociolinguistic phenomenon, might be seen as moments at which such indexical orders – perceived shareability of meaningful signs – are taking shape. The two billion views of Gangnam Style suggest that large numbers of people in various places on earth recognized *something* in the video; what it is exactly they experienced as recognizable is hard to determine, and research on this topic – how virality might inform us on emergent forms of social and cultural normativity in new and unclear large globalized human collectives – is long overdue.

Some suggestions in this direction can be offered, though. In earlier work, we tried to describe “light” forms of community formation in the online-offline contemporary world as “focused but diverse” (Blommaert & Varis 2013). Brief moments of focusing on perceived recognizable and shareable features of social activity generate temporary groups – think of the thousands who “liked” Zuckerberg’s status update – while such groups do not require the kinds of strong and lasting bonds grounded in shared bodies of knowledge we associate with more traditionally conceived “communities” or “societies”. In fact, they are groups selected on demand, so to speak, by individual users in the ways we discussed earlier. People can focus and re-focus perpetually, and do so (which explains the *speed* of virality) without being tied into a community of fixed circumscription, given the absence of the deep and strong bonds that tie them together, and the absence of temporal and spatial copresence that characterizes online groups.

A joint “phatic” focus on recognizable form or shape offers possibilities for such processes of groupness, while the actual functional appropriation and deployment of signs – what they actually mean for actual users – is hugely diverse; the infinite productivity of memes – the perpetual construction of memic “accents” – illustrates this. Here we begin to see something fundamental about communities in an online age: the joint focusing, even if “phatic”, is in itself not trivial, it creates a *structural* level of conviviality, i.e. a sharing at one level of meaningful interaction by means of a joint feature, which in superficial but real ways translates a number of individuals into a focused collective. Note, and we repeat, that what this collective shares is the sheer act of phatic communion (the “sharing” itself, so to speak), while the precise meaning of this practice for each individual member of the collective is impossible to determine. But since Malinowski and Goffman, we have learned not to underestimate the importance of unimportant social activities. Memes force us to think about levels of social structuring that we very often overlook because we consider them meaningless.

This neglect of conviviality has effects. In the superdiversity that characterizes online-offline social worlds, we easily tend to focus on differences and downplay the level of social structuring that actually prevents these differences from turning into conflicts. Recognizing such hitherto neglected levels of social structuring might also serve as a corrective to rapid qualifications of the present

era as being “postsocial” – a point on which we disagree with Vincent Miller. There is a great deal of sociality going on on social media, but this sociality might require a new kind of sociological imagination. We will look in vain for communities and societies that resemble the ones proposed by Durkheim and Parsons. But that does not mean that such units are not present, and even less that they are not in need of description.

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